

Messianic Chevruta Series: Ruth

Derek Leman

Questions

Questions are a great way to stimulate thinking and read more closely. The following questions could be used before every session and before every reading.

How can David's line come from Ruth, a Moabite, when Torah says no Moabite or Ammonite for ten generations may enter the assembly?

Was Boaz a legitimate kinsman redeemer according to the Torah's levirate marriage regulations? Do the Biblical genealogies tell us how Boaz is related? Rabbinic tradition?

Is Boaz as go'el (redeemer) intended to have messianic overtones?

Is there a purpose for this book amid the time of the Judges?

Did Boaz die right after his wedding night?

How does the Ruth story fit into the transcendent story arc of the Bible (the Abrahamic blessing)?

Your Questions:

Notes

In **Ruth Rabbah**, a collection of *midrashim* about Ruth, there are some intriguing ideas about the book:

- Ruth begins with *va-yehi*, and R. Hiyya and R. Eleazar made a ruling from this that “wherever the word *va-yehi* occurs, there is trouble [coming in the story].”
- *Va-yehi* is used twice in Ruth’s first verse, which the sages took to mean once for the famine of bread and a second time for a famine of Torah.
- The name Elimelech could be taken as “my God is king” or “unto me is king[ship].” Thus, Ruth Rabbah has a tradition in which Elimelech used to say, “The kingship shall come to me [some day].”
- There is a tradition that Elimelech was guilty for discouraging Israel. In spite of being well-known and wealthy, he left in famine so he would not have to share his wealth with his struggling neighbors. When they saw him leave, the people despaired.
- A tradition says that Ruth and Orpah were daughters of King Eglon of Moab (*Judges 3:14*) and interprets Ruth’s inclusion in Messiah’s line as a lesson to Moab.
- R. Ze’era explained that Ruth was written to show the reward of those who engage in *g’milut chasadim* (acts of kindness).

Genealogy: *1 Chronicles 2:11* places Boaz in the line of Judah through Perez. Boaz’s grandfather, Nahshon, is called a prince of Judah. In *Exodus 6:23*, Nahshon is the brother-in-law of Aaron and in *Numbers 2:3* he is called the leader of Judah.

Levirate Marriage: *Deuteronomy 25:5-10*. See also *Leviticus 25:25, 47-49* about redeeming the kinsman’s property.

Outline of Ruth

- 1:1-5 Prologue: Famine and Elimelech and Family Emigrate to Moab
- 1:6-18 Adonai's Return, Naomi's Goodbyes, and Ruth's Clinging
- 1:19-22 Naomi's Return and Sense of Emptiness
- 2:1-16 Ruth Gleans, Boaz Blesses
- 2:17-23 Naomi Instructs Ruth about Boaz as Redeemer
- 3:1-18 Ruth Offers Herself to Boaz on the Threshing Floor
- 4:1-12 The Nearer Redeemer Cedes to Boaz
- 4:13-17 Boaz Takes Ruth as Wife and She Conceives
- 4:18-22 Boaz and Ruth's Line to King David

Topics for Study and Discussion

- I. The Fall of the Mighty Elimelech
- II. Famine of Land and Torah
- III. Ruth as a Convert and Model of Hesed
- IV. Land Redemption and Levirate Marriage
- V. Redeemer
- VI. Boaz Among the Families of Judah
- VII. From Moabite to Messiah?

I. The Fall of the Mighty Elimelech

There is a tradition that is ancient, but not as ancient as the text of Ruth itself, that Elimelech was a great man. The Talmud says that Elimelech and his sons were the leaders of their generation (Bava Bathra 91a). Long before that, in a Targum (Aramaic paraphrase), we find a slight expansion in Ruth 1:1 compared to the Hebrew text. Where the Hebrew of Ruth 1:1 says “a man went from Bethlehem,” the Aramaic paraphrase reads, “a great man went from Bethlehem.” This suggests that the tradition about Elimelech as a leader goes back to the Second Temple period.

- Find Bethlehem and Moab on a map.
- Discuss whether Elimelech should have left Judah as he did.
- How do the blessing and curses of Torah combine with what you know of the era of Judges to explain the conditions at the beginning of Ruth? How does this impact your understanding of Elimelech’s leaving? (cf. Leviticus 26:3-46; Deuteronomy 28; Judges 2:6-22).
- Are the blessings and curses of Torah individual or corporate? What is the difference? How does this affect a righteous man living in a wicked generation?
- Are there any hints that tell us whether Elimelech might have been Torah-faithful or not?

According to tradition about Elimelech, his leaving Judah was a great tragedy and sin. The leaving of a great man from Judah discouraged all the people who stayed in the famine. Tradition even claims that Elimelech could have supported many families during the famine, but wanted to keep all for his own (Talmud, Bava Bathra 91b).

- Do the traditions which add to the Biblical story of Elimelech add to or detract from the power of the story in your opinion?
- Why do you think later generations felt it important to add such details to the story?
- How does your reading of Elimelech’s character from the Biblical text compare or contrast to the expansions?

II. Famine of Land and Torah

In Hebrew, 1:1 has interesting repetition, *Va-yehi bimei shofot shofetim va-yehi ra'av...* A midrash included in a collection called *Yalkut Shimoni* teaches that there is a reason *va-yehi* is repeated. *Va-yehi* means “and it happened.” According to the midrash the first time announces a famine of grain and the second time a famine of Torah.

- The interpretation above is an example of the principle endorsed by the sages: nothing is in the Torah without a reason. How does this principle relate to the interpretation above?
- How do you feel about this principle?
- What are the implications for the way we read Torah?

Archaeology confirms the statements frequently found in the prophets that many in Israel were far from the God of Israel. Ruth begins *bimei shofot shofetim*, “in the days when the Judges were judging.” In Judges 2:11-13 we read of a cycle of apathy, ignorance, and faithlessness in Israel: the people abandoned Adonai, went after other deities, and served them. In many places in Israel researchers have found evidence of idolatry and syncretistic worship (blending pagan ideas with a nominal allegiance to God), such as female idols likely thought of a God’s wife.

- Have you noticed a tendency in your own thinking or among those you discuss the Bible with to imagine a more pious Israel?
- One Jewish writer says that in the days of the Judges Israel was mostly faithful but the crisis times in the book were relatively rare periods of apostasy. Do you agree?
- According to Torah, how is a famine in the land related to a famine of Torah faithfulness?
- How does Naomi’s personal tragedy (1:20-21) relate to Israel’s tragedy? What does this say about corporate and individual suffering?

Boaz is introduced as an *ish gibbor*, a formidable man (or perhaps worthy, wealthy, or even mighty, 2:1). He greets his workers with a blessing in the name of Adonai (2:4). He shows gentle protectiveness toward Ruth, an immigrant of little means (2:5-13).

