

OneBook.

THE EPIC
OF EDEN

RUTH



STUDY BOOK

SANDRA L. RICHTER

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OF EDEN

RUTH

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WEEK ONE

Introduction

As you heard in our introductory video session, I've chosen the book of Ruth for this study for three reasons. One reason is that Ruth is simply a great story. Life and loss, love and loyalty, intrigue, racism, and ridicule all find a place in this narrative. If you finish this story without a passion for the redemption of this extended family, I will not have done my job! The second reason I chose this book is because of the story's challenging account of everyday lives lived with extraordinary integrity. Even though every one of us wants our life to make a difference, very few of us get to be Captain America or Wonder Woman and rescue the world from a storybook villain. But every one of us has some sort of sphere of influence. In Ruth and Boaz we find two ordinary people who demonstrate what it means to make a difference in the ordinary circumstances of day-to-day life. We find in these two everyday heroes lives filled with rigorous honesty, self-sacrifice, hard work, uncommon courage, and kindness. And we, the readers, get to see what the far-reaching impact of such a life looks like as well. Even when no one was watching or no one cared enough to notice—even when their integrity was interpreted as something else—these two choose over and over again to do the *right* thing.

The character for whom the book is named is Ruth. She is essentially an illegal immigrant. I describe her in my classes as a sharecropper of sorts who has snuck across the border to work under the radar as a day laborer.

No one expected integrity from a girl like her. Moreover, the bias against her kind is such that no one would *see* integrity in her behavior even if it were obvious. Boaz, on the other hand, our main male character, is rich and influential. He is a pillar of the community. If he misbehaves, who would dare say? Especially if he misbehaves toward the sharecropper girl. And yet, over and over again, this book speaks of these two as a people of *hayil*. This is a Hebrew word often used to describe a select warrior, an impressively wealthy person, a strong government, or an impressive army or treasury. In this book, the word has a very particular application—these people, Ruth and Boaz, are people of *excellence*. In everything they do, wherever they do it, they do it with integrity and self-sacrificing commitment. These are the exemplars of the modern proverb, “faithful in little, faithful in much” (see Matt. 25:21) . . . but doing so in very *real* life circumstances.

The third reason I chose this study has to do with the *canonical* context of this book. This is a new word for many of you. It has to do with where the book of Ruth lands in your Bible. As you will learn, the book of Ruth follows the book of Judges in the Protestant canon. The era of the judges was one of profound dysfunction and corruption, yet in the midst of one of the most corrupt eras of Israelite history comes the story of one young woman, a foreigner, who enters the community of God’s people seeking refuge under the wings of Yahweh, the God of Israel. And her personal integrity so inspires the locals in a little town called Bethlehem that she winds up transforming and *saving* its citizenry. She is claimed by the leading citizen of the town as his wife, and she and this community are saved as a result of the courage, kindness, and self-sacrifice of each. What a great place to launch your study of the Old Testament!

hayil: “A Hebrew word often used to describe a select warrior, an impressively wealthy person, a strong government, or an impressive army or treasury. In this book, the word has a very particular application—these people, Ruth and Boaz, are people of *excellence*.”

Canon: the list of books in the Bible that have been identified and authorized by the Jewish and Christian communities as “Scripture,” meaning “inspired by God.”

Canonical: belonging to that authorized canon.

What Makes This Study Different?

If your group has already worked through *The Epic of Eden: Understanding the Old Testament* study or *The Epic of Eden: Isaiah* study, you will notice that this study may look and sound a bit different. That is because this study was not written for the standard churchgoer but for that person who has always *wanted* to do a Bible study but didn’t know where to start. As someone who teaches Bible all the time in all sorts of contexts, I wanted to put together a study for my neighbors, friends, family, and newcomers to my church. In other words, people who want to know what is *in* the Bible but don’t necessarily want to join a church to do so. So for you seasoned insiders, the tone of this study might seem a bit different. For you who still consider yourselves outsiders, this one’s for you!

How Is This Going to Work?

As you saw in the introductory session, this study revolves around a DVD set of six filmed studies (each lasting approximately thirty minutes). These are designed to be viewed during group time once per week. Each one will end with a launch question to get the group conversation rolling.

The second component is a study book for the group member, which includes three individual studies per week, to be done at home whenever it fits your schedule. As a newcomers’ study we do not assume that everyone

WEEK ONE

will have their own Bible, so the study books have all of the biblical passages discussed in each study. In this way, everyone will be answering questions in the study book using the same translation of the Bible. Also, for those who are hesitant to write in their Bibles, this will provide a place to mark the text guilt-free. Another option your group might want to discuss is to have everyone buy the same Bible. The New Living Translation is a good choice. The New International Version is still very accessible too.

The third component is the Leader's Guide, designed to help your leaders facilitate group time. The idea is that each member will be working at home at his or her own pace on the three weekly studies in the study book and the leader(s) will be responsible for facilitating the group meeting. Do as much or as little of the study book as your schedule permits. No pressure, really. (Homework *not* required!) Once per week your group will gather to view the filmed study, talk about the individual work from the week, and focus on group discussion questions.

Got it? Got it! Let the adventure begin!

WEEK TWO

Getting Past the Great Barrier

A Word from the Author

I have found that most people are pretty interested in what might be in the Bible. But as many have been raised without any real exposure to the book, they're pretty intimidated by the idea of joining a Bible study. *What if I'm not religious? What if everyone else knows stuff I don't know? What if I can't find the passages we're supposed to be looking at? What if I look stupid?* These worries are not unusual; in fact, they are completely standard for any adult learner. So when nine other newbies and I launched our study in my neighborhood (with the evolving guide you are now holding in your hands), it made *everyone* nervous. We even had several members who panicked and backed out at the last second, only to come back around when other group members confessed their own discomfort: "Hey, I don't know any of this either!" So I write this note to tell you it's okay to be nervous, and it's okay not to know anything about the Bible. As I said in the introduction, this one's for you!

One thing that will help us all get on the same page is to know that all Bibles, whatever the translation, have a table of contents in the beginning that will help you find what you're looking for. For this study, you're looking for the eighth book, the book of Ruth. We'll also make regular reference to

the seventh book, the book of Judges. Your table of contents will help you find these books. Know that it is also perfectly fine to highlight or write in your Bible if you want to. (I do it all the time.) And if all else fails, know that *all* of the passages you need will be printed in this guide.

So as your group launches into this study, I want you to know that the Bible was written for *you*. All of the stories, laws, poems, and proverbs were recorded long ago to make sure that the greatest story ever told gets told to the next generation. And each of these narratives and poems represents a real person in real space and time who wound up meeting God and wrote it down so that you and I could meet God as well.

Real Time and Space

A significant part of Ruth's story has to do with her identity as an outsider. But to recognize her as the outsider, we are going to need to know something about what being an insider in Bethlehem in the days of the Judges might have looked like. So our study this week focuses on the *culture* of Israel's world in the days of Ruth.

Culture is a funny thing. Knowing the appropriate courtesies and conventions of any culture gives you all sorts of access to people and power. And as all of us who have had cross-cultural experiences know, *not* knowing those conventions and courtesies can be disastrous!

Although I've spent a great deal of my life in other people's cultures, and had dozens of outsider experiences, one of my most ironic cross-cultural failures happened in my very own country—when I, an East Coaster, Harvard-trained, New Englander arrived in Madison, Mississippi, to work in an inner-city seminary in Jackson. In the midst of a thousand transitions, one of my tasks for the day was to get my three-year-old registered for preschool. But unbeknownst to me, the preschool I'd chosen for my daughter had an august reputation as *the* feeder school for Jackson Academy—a private school in the heart of Northeast Jackson. (By the way, this is the neighborhood featured in the famous book and film *The Help*.) If you are from Mississippi you know that Jackson Academy is *the* academic avenue to

Ole Miss (the University of Mississippi), and as long as you're not a Mississippi State University fan, you know that Ole Miss is the crown of the Deep South.

Hence when I showed up in my strap-on hiking sandals and equally strapped-down frizzy hair thinking that I was going to fill out a few forms and head home to unpack more boxes, I found that I was sadly mistaken. As all the Mississippi moms knew, preschool registration at this particular school is an event for which one *dressed*. Moreover, preschool registration apparently involved a *program* that, to my dismay, I quickly realized my enormously underdressed and poorly groomed self had to stay for. Alas, as an East Coaster I had no idea that preschool registration in Northeast Jackson was a networking event. I'd also never heard of Jackson Academy, Ole Miss, or Mississippi State (not a forgivable error in my new home state).

The kindness of my new neighbors helped me navigate this and many other social blunders (like never being able to predict exactly who I was supposed to/not supposed to address as "ma'am" or how to eat crawfish without singeing my sinuses). Indeed, I needed *help* to understand this new culture. In a similar fashion, if we are going to understand what it meant to be a Moabite in the land of Israel, we're going to need some help as well.

As you work through this week's studies, try to imagine yourself as a member of Israel's ancient world where the extended family was the basic unit and regulatory force of society. Think about what it might look like to be an insider or an outsider and what it would look like for God to connect with the real people living and breathing in this sort of tribal, patriarchal culture.

DAY ONE

Introduction to the Bible

First Contact

When I joined my first Bible study, I had a vague idea which books belonged to the Old Testament versus the New Testament, and I'm pretty sure I could have recited the Gospels in order. But otherwise, I was at a loss as to how to navigate the leather-bound book in my hand. In fact, prior to that time the only Bible I'd actually seen up close was the coffee table-sized family heirloom my parents kept in the living room. So when it came to *finding* a book in the Bible, I was at a loss! Today's study is intended to introduce you to the contents of the Bible so that you can navigate your way as we launch into the study of the book of Ruth.

Into the Book

What exactly is the Bible? First of all, it is a book; more specifically, it is a collection of books. The Bible is made up of sixty-six books—thirty-nine in what is known as the Old Testament and twenty-seven in what is known as the New Testament. All of these books together tell the story of God's interactions with humanity and his plan of *redemption* (a term you will learn about in another session).

DAY ONE

The Old Testament books pertain to the history of Israel prior to the birth of Jesus. These books can be further subdivided into the Pentateuch, the Historical Books, the Wisdom Literature, and the Prophets (as detailed in the chart below).

The Old Testament

The Pentateuch (or the Law, or the Books of Moses)	The Historical Books	Wisdom Literature (also known as Poetic Books)	The Prophets
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Joshua Judges Ruth 1 and 2 Samuel 1 and 2 Kings 1 and 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther	Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon	Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi

The New Testament books are books that were written after the birth of Jesus and consist of the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, twenty-one Epistles (or letters), and the book of Revelation.

The New Testament

The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles	Epistles and the book of Revelation
Matthew Mark Luke John Acts	Romans 1 and 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 and 2 Thessalonians 1 and 2 Timothy Titus Philemon Hebrews James 1 and 2 Peter 1, 2, and 3 John Jude Revelation

- Turn to the table of contents in your Bible. Run your finger down the books listed and see how they align with the charts provided here.

- How many of these books look familiar? List three of the most familiar here and make sure you know where they fall in the table of contents.

- How many of these books have you never heard of before? List three of those most unfamiliar here. Maybe your Bible study leader can tell you something about these outliers!

- Now locate the book of Ruth. What book immediately precedes it? What book immediately follows it?

- Are you able to name any of the judges from memory? List them here.
- Bonus questions: Have you heard of Samuel before? Do you know which king he anointed as the first king over Israel?

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

A major theme for me when I teach the Bible is to communicate to my students (whether they are college level, graduate, doctoral, laypeople, or ministers) that the narratives in the Bible are about *real* people, who lived in *real* places, and were struggling with most of the same life issues that we are. Yes, their economies were vastly different, their family structures distinct from ours, their ideas of proper social conduct foreign. But when push came to shove they were striving for the same things we are—meaningful work, financial security, sound families, and fulfilling relationships. Whether the challenge is unemployment or famine, the death of a young spouse to cancer or an unnamed cause in Moab, danger on the El in Chicago or danger on the road to Bethlehem—the underlying issues are the same. As we launch our journey back into Ruth’s world, do your very best to see our characters as *real* people, and do your very best to translate their issues into your own.

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

Speaking with a wise friend the other evening at dinner, she made the comment that unemployment and underemployment are the famine of our generation. As I was actually taking a break from working on this study book to have dinner with her and her husband, her comment caught my attention. As you will soon read, the opening sentence of the book of Ruth states that there is a famine in the land. Naomi and Elimelech, two characters

WEEK TWO

you will soon meet, are faced with famine. In their world, drought was not uncommon. If there was one year of drought, most families could bounce back; two years, many families could bounce back; three years of drought equaled a famine and a community-wide crisis. The result? Families had to move. An unexpected layoff makes families move in the same fashion. The loss of one job and not the other can divide and displace families as spouses search for enough income to pay the bills and keep the family functioning. What Ruth would have known as “gleaning” we know as “temp projects” or “consulting.” Any of these scenarios leaves a family under extreme stress. Marriages collapse. Extended families are separated. Immediate families are divided. I’m going to guess that there is more than one person in your world who is struggling with the realities of unemployment, a house that won’t sell, a mortgage that can’t be paid, a credit score that is keeping them from a decent rental. Know before you enter our narrative that although our characters would have had no idea what a credit check was, or the limits to unemployment benefits, this is their *real* world. This is a family in crisis.

DAY TWO

A Cross-Cultural Experience

First Contact

Although we may not recognize it, we all encounter cross-cultural experiences every day. We all come from different families, backgrounds, and ethnicities. What may be completely normal behavior for one may be completely incomprehensible to another. For my undergrads at Wheaton College, I was entertained to learn that for many, their first experience with this sort of cross-culture shock was their first sleepover—where they were stunned to find that some families have no curfews, consider Captain Crunch an acceptable breakfast food, and have ice cream as an after-school snack. Shocking. Or perhaps Kathy Noftsinger’s experience (one of our team here at Seedbed) teaching a group of extremely deferential Korean students in Switzerland. As most Western professors know, Koreans have a reputation of being exceptionally respectful of teachers of all sorts. But upon arriving at the lunchroom, this same group began pushing and shoving their way to the front of the line. When Kathy finally asked someone what was going on, she learned that in Korea, where many live with constant overcrowding, it

is perfectly acceptable to push and shove your way through a crowd—not at all acceptable in the States or Britain! Does that make this other family or culture inferior to mine? No! It just means theirs is *different*.

Into the Book

As we get into our study of the book of Ruth, it is important to recognize that our culture and their culture are definitely *different*. Our culture is not better than their culture, just as their culture is not better than our culture. But if we are going to understand Israel, it is our job to get past our own *ethnocentrism* (the word used in the video to describe viewing one’s own culture as normal and another’s as strange) and see Israel’s world as they did.

In order to gain a bit of understanding about Israelite culture, we will read these verses found in chapter 1 of Ruth. As you read:

- Underline any words or ideas that are representative of a culture that is different from your own.
- Circle things that are foreign—names, places, and ideas that you don’t recognize.

Ruth 1:1–14

¹In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and

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the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years,⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. ⁷So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. ⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” ¹¹But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹²Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.” ¹⁴Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. (NRSV)

Patriarchal: In a tribal society, the patriarch, or the oldest living male, is the center of the household. All authority and responsibility for the household rests upon him.

Patrilocal: The family unit and the living space are built around the patriarch. The family collectively farms the land it jointly owns and shares its produce.

bêt 'āb: “father’s household” or the family compound. This is the basic family unit in Israel’s world (fifteen to twenty persons). In our world, this would be an extended family.

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

As a tribal society, Israel’s culture can be defined as *patriarchal*. This means that the oldest living male in the household, the “patriarch,” held the ultimate authority and responsibility for the household. Israel’s culture was also *patrilocal*, meaning that the family unit lived in one space that revolved around the patriarch. This household, known as the *bêt 'āb*, or the “father’s household,” consisted of the patriarch, his wife, their adult sons and their wives, and any minor children. This extended family could include as many as three generations (as many as fifteen to twenty persons). All these family members lived together in the family compound with each member contributing to domestic chores, farming the land, and caring for the livestock.

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

It is often very difficult for modern people to separate our cultural norms from those of the people who inhabited the Bible. We feel offended by what we see as their chauvinism; we find it difficult to take their economic needs

DAY TWO

seriously; we don't understand their value system. Perhaps even more challenging, we want all the people in the Bible to be perfect because . . . well, they're in the Bible, aren't they? I challenge you as we move forward to take Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz as real people, who themselves are totally human and struggling with their own issues in their own world. And I want to challenge you to recognize that for whatever reason, God chose to reveal himself to *us* by interacting with *them* in their own space and time. Just as we are probably not quite as we'd like ourselves to be, so too our characters probably felt the same way. This is who they were, not necessarily as we might have wanted them to be.

DAY THREE

Genealogy

First Contact

In today's Internet world, it is possible to find tons of information online. One piece of information that many people search for is their ancestry. They want to know where they came from, who their great-great-grandparents were, their place of origin, their DNA, etc. If you were searching for your ancestors, what information would you be looking for?

Into the Book

We begin our study by reading from the opening chapter of the New Testament, Matthew 1:1–17. This first chapter of the New Testament is all about origins. Where did Jesus come from? Who were his great-great-grandparents and where did they come from? In this passage that often seems a bit dull to the modern reader, all of the questions that any Jew would have wanted to know about their Messiah are answered. Can you see those answers in this text?

Matthew 1:1–17

¹The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham:

²Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. ³Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez was the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram. ⁴Ram was the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon. ⁵Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab, Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse. ⁶Jesse was the father of David the king.

David was the father of Solomon by Bathsheba who had been the wife of Uriah. ⁷Solomon was the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asa. ⁸Asa was the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah. ⁹Uzziah was the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah. ¹⁰Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, and Amon the father of Josiah. ¹¹Josiah became the father of Jeconiah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

¹²After the deportation to Babylon: Jeconiah became the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel. ¹³Zerubbabel was the father of Abihud, Abihud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor. ¹⁴Azor was the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud. ¹⁵Eliud was the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob. ¹⁶Jacob was the

father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

¹⁷So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

- Verses 1–17 of this opening chapter of the New Testament are something called a “genealogy,” a listing of an important person’s ancestors and/or descendants. In this case the important person is Jesus himself. Circle any names that are familiar to you.
- Were there more familiar or unfamiliar names to you?
- Underline the names of the women mentioned in the genealogy. Did you find our heroine, Ruth? Jot down the female names you recognize and what you know about each of those female characters.
- How would you characterize the occupations/origins/reputations of the women who have found their way into Jesus’ genealogy?
- Does it bother you that there are more men’s names listed than women’s? Why?
- Why do you think women with such challenging stories would be the ones featured in Jesus’ genealogy?

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

You've now seen that the majority of the names listed in Matthew's genealogy are male. This has to do with our third descriptor of Israelite culture: *patrilineal*. This means that ancestral descent and inheritance were traced through the male line in ancient Israel. Tribal identity came from one's father, not one's mother. And when a woman married, her tribal affiliation shifted to that of her husband's. Land and children always belonged to the patriarch and his sons, not his wife or his daughters. Although women were critical members of the household, their tribal affiliation was flexible and they did not inherit under normal circumstances.

Is this a cultural value we're supposed to imitate in the twenty-first century? Of course not. But is it the cultural norm in Ruth's and later in Jesus' world? Yes! This teaches us *why* women are typically not named in the genealogies in the Bible—not because women weren't valued, but because women had little or no role in the tracking of tribal identity or inheritance. Yet as you've already noted, in this particular genealogy, five women are named specifically. And one of them is the leading lady of our study. This very unusual presentation of a genealogy should catch our attention. Obviously, our biblical writers want us to *see* these women. Why?

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

As I anticipate you've already figured out, every woman named in Jesus' genealogy was in some way an outsider. Tamar was the Canaanite daughter-in-law who had to go to extreme efforts to secure her rights. Rahab was a courageous woman of espionage and intrigue who (although a resident in the city of Jericho) chose to ally herself with Joshua's army and Joshua's

Patrilineal: In Israel's patriarchal society, ancestral descent and inheritance were traced through the male line.

WEEK TWO

God. Ruth was a foreigner. Bathsheba was a woman exploited by a king, who eventually became the mother of a king. These women are each emerging from the wrong side of the tracks in one way or another. Mary is, of course, essential to the story as she was the *virgin* mother of Jesus, the Christ. Note as well that she was also a young, unmarried woman who was attempting to explain to her father and her fiancé how she became pregnant! Yet the biblical writers highlight the presence of these women in the story of Jesus Christ. Why do you think that is? What is it that the biblical writers want you to know about Jesus and his gospel?