Ruth: Responses to Questions

*What was the significance of the author not directly talking about Yahweh and his role in this story?*

\*\*As in Esther, it puts the emphasis on the human actions and the “coincidences” through which God works.

*How factual is the book of Ruth?*

\*\*My guess is that you wouldn’t make up a genealogy for David or make up the idea that his great-grandmother was a Moabite. But the inclusion of transcripts of many conversations (for instance) suggests the work of a storyteller’s imagination. So as usual in the Bible, the story is like a movie “based on fact.”

*To what extent should we read this story with the book of Judges in mind, given its narrated context in 1:1?*

Like the opening of 1 Samuel, it makes for a nice contrast with Judges (though remember that it doesn’t follow Judges in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings).

*Is it okay that the people leave Israel for their living? And traditionally, Israelites were not allowed to marry outside their own people.  What is the significance in Mahlon and Kilion marrying Moabites?*

I don’t think the story hints at critique, and there are a number of occasions when this kind of thing happens (see esp. Gen 46). Where does it actually say that Israelites were not allowed to marry outside their own people? What else can you do in a foreign country? Compare Joseph and Moses marrying foreigners. The OT is not legalistic.

*Naomi blames God for her suffering. God is responsible for everything, good and bad, but we like to separate good from bad and so think of God as bringing only good, and Satan as bringing bad. What would it mean if we truly thought all things good and bad come from God?*

\*\*It would give us more basis for urging God to do something about it. (Where in the NT does it say that Satan not God causes the bad things that happen to us?)

*A couple of questions about why bad things happen to good people:*

1. *Why did Ruth and Naomi not see the bad in their life as consequence for wrong that they have done, like so many other characters in the Old Testament seem to?*
2. *Is it safe to relate and compare this book to the book of Job?*

Actually the second question helps with the first. Do so many other characters think that way? Job’s friends do; but (e.g.) Joseph, many psalmists, and Jeremiah, as well as Job, don’t. Maybe Naomi and Ruth asked the question, and couldn’t see they had done wrong that pointed in this direction.

*Some questions about Ruth as a Moabite:*

1. *I would be interested to know more about the relations between Israel and Moab and how Ruth would have been viewed by the people of Bethlehem. It seems that she should have been viewed as more of an outsider than she was, and Boaz would have been looked down upon for his actions.*
2. *I am interested in Ruth’s initial decision to remain with Naomi and make the people and God of Israel her own. What were the implications for Naomi of returning to Israel with a widowed Moabite? What were the implications for Boaz of marrying her?*
3. *How did Israelites take this book, when the Moabite seems to be at the center of the story, communicating God’s faithfulness?  How did that fly with these Israelites who had strong pride as an exclusively chosen people of God?*
4. *Assuming that this story belongs to the post-exilic era, how does this story compare with other accounts for how Israel ought to regard inter-marriage with foreigners (Ruth gives a rather positive perspective, so long as those foreigners are content to let “your God be my God”)?*

\*\*I guess people would know in theory that people from other ethnic and religious backgrounds were welcome to come and be adopted into Israel as servants of Yahweh. There is no indication in the OT that Israel believed itself as the chosen people of God in such a way as to exclude God’s love for other peoples. Marrying a foreigner did not make you unclean if this person had come to believe in Yahweh. But the story keeps emphasizing that she was a Moabite, which reflects the fact that it would be an issue because there would doubtless be prejudice in practice, the same as there is for us (as when people of African origin were not welcomes into white churches in the U.S. and the U.K.). There are other OT stories that would give people the excuse for anti-Moabite prejudice (Gen 19; Num 25; Ezra 9; see also Deut 23). So the Bethlehemites and Boaz in particular model an open-hearted attitude.

*What kind of women would seek work as Ruth did in the fields?*

\*\*Any needy person might “glean”—that is, collect the grain that got left behind.

*Why was Boaz so impressed with Ruth?*

See 2:11.

 *It's difficult to see how (or if) Naomi knew that Boaz was going to take Ruth as his wife. I'm curious to what led her to tell Ruth to go by the threshing floor. Was this something common in those days for someone to do for their widowed daughter or daughter-in-law?*

\*\*I guess it’s a bit like asking someone for a date, or eventually proposing. You have to take a chance. But she mentions that Boaz is their relative and she knows he has been kind to Ruth, so it’s not just a shot in the dark.

*Were the intrigue and match-making skills that Naomi showed in securing a name for her husband selfish or selfless? Why was it so important for Naomi to keep her husband’s name going even if it is at the cost of Boaz’s name?*

\*\*I guess there is a selfish element (it safeguard’s the future for her and Ruth) but also a broader consideration—she is concerned for Elimelek, for their family, and for their family land. She hopes that Boaz will be prepared to bear any cost to his resources (that’s what a “redeemer” does), as he is evidently doing okay economically.

*What was the kinsman/redeemer law? If Naomi knew from the beginning about it, why didn't she approach Boaz earlier? Was she so ashamed of her past that she didn't want to ask? In fact, she would have known about this law prior to leaving Moab. in which case, it would have been to her benefit to encourage one of her daughter-in-laws to return with her.*

There are two related practices. One is that if someone gets into an economic mess, gets into debt, and loses his land, a member of his extended family could be expected to meet his debt so that he can regain his land. The other is that if a man dies without heir, his brother-in-law could be expected to marry or have sex with the man’s widow with the hope that she could have a baby who would count as the dead man’s and could in due course inherit the land and thus keep it in the family. In neither case are these expectations exactly laws, so that you could take someone to court for ignoring them—as is suggested by the fact that the first relative declines to act as redeemer/restorer. The practice is more a social expectation. So Naomi couldn’t assume that any on her relatives would do the right thing.

*I would like to know more about the customs of that time and why it seemed that men had all the rights to land and property and women had so little rights.*

\*\*Something like that has been the norm in all cultures until the modern West, though maybe “rights” isn’t quite the right way to put it; “rights” is a modern idea. The land doesn’t belong to the men but to the family, and the male head of the family has responsibility for seeing that it is looked after and stays in the family. It does mean that the idea of a woman living independently on her own would be strange—but the idea of a man living independently on his own would also be strange. Israel believed that people belonged in communities.

*Do we know much about the character of the first guardian-redeemer and the transaction that happened between him and Boaz? Was Boaz using Naomi and Ruth in his favor because he truly loved Ruth or was this situation “coincidental”?*

\*\*We don’t know the detail about the transaction (including the sandal ritual) but it looks as if the original guardian-redeemer was afraid he would be imperiling his own family’s resources if he took on Ruth and Naomi, because it would cost him in resources to get their land back from whoever had it from them (as a consequence of Elimelek and Naomi’s debt) but the land would not ultimately belong to his family but to the family that Ruth would start. Boaz was prepared to say “Whatever!”

*Why isn’t Boaz married already, or is he? What makes him so eager to bear children that will not be his inheritance? In light of the last question, why does he commend Ruth for choosing him rather than a young man (3:10)?*

Maybe he is a bachelor; but it would be odd, as you imply, because people usually married young. Maybe Ruth is an extra wife, which would not be uncommon, especially when there is a woman like Ruth who needs to be part of a family; but this idea rather clashes with the warm tone of the story, which makes it seem romantic. Maybe he is a widower; maybe his wife died in childbirth; this idea fits his comment implying that he is rather older than Ruth. His eagerness is an indication that he is a good guy who wants to do the right thing by Naomi and Ruth.

*How is Boaz a representation of Christ as a kinsman redeemer?*

\*\*I’d say he is more a representation of God as kinsman redeemer (since the OT picks up that image to describe God, esp. in Isaiah 40—55). Jesus then represents God.

*Some questions about Ruth and salvation beyond Israel:*

1. *What is the significance of the idea that a non-Jew, a Moabite, was grafted or adopted into a line that would bring us David? Does this somehow enlighten or anticipate a covenant or salvation that goes beyond Israel?*
2. *Is the story of Ruth linked to Jesus’ invitation to salvation for all, Jews and Gentiles alike, in the NT?*
3. *Do Jews hold to the idea that Jesus could not be the Messiah because he has non-Jewish blood through his ancestry?*

\*\*In the OT, membership of Israel was never confined to Israel (to put it paradoxically)—non-Israelites who became servants of Yahweh could always be adopted into Israel (Rahab, Uriah, Obed-edom…). Likewise, the OT always assumes that Yahweh cares about all the nations and is going to be recognized by all the nations. The nearest link in the NT would be her appearing among women of dubious background in Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew 1. The fact that David had some non-Jewish blood would mean that any Messiah would have non-Jewish blood.

*Are Ruth and Naomi pawns in the patriarchal society, exploited for their biological role in providing male lineages?*

\*\*If anyone is a pawn who is exploited, it’s Boaz, the man, I’d say! The story indeed works within the framework of a patriarchal society but it portrays women using the patriarchal system and pushing its boundaries (on the threshing floor!). Even the concern with male lineage works for the benefit of the family in ensuring that a family keeps its land, as well as for the benefit of the men.

*Would either Ruth or Boaz have lived long enough to know that their grandson would become king?*

\*\*Well let me try to do the math. At the lowest, let’s say Ruth was 20 when she had Obed and that she was 40 when Obed had Jesse and that she was 60 when it was clear that David would become king. It would be possible, though not many people lived till 60.

*Why is David mentioned?*

\*\*Because David is interesting, and because the fact that his great-grandmother was a Moabite ought to encourage people to be open to Moabites coming to serve Yahweh and seek adoption into Israel.

*If the “feet” in Ruth 3 signify genitalia and the two lovers’ nocturnal meeting has a sexual nature, how does this biblical example affect the popular evangelical advocacy for abstinence and sex within the confinements of marriage?*

\*\*While the word could mean what it says, “feet” can indeed be a euphemism for genitals (cf. Isaiah 6:2). So she might or might not be propositioning him sexually. But if she is, she’s not offering him a one-night stand. Either way, she is proposing marriage. If he simply extends his covering to her or if he has sex with her, he has accepted her proposal. The Torah makes clear that Israel assumes abstinence and the confining of sex within marriage, though the process whereby you become married differs from ours!

*In Ruth, God doesn’t appear to work according to conventional norms: e.g., Ruth lying at the feet of Boaz, which would be dangerous and socially immoral, Ruth’s challenge that Boaz marry her, her proposing to an Israelite when she is a foreigner, and her doing the proposing when she is a woman. If the customs of the time are based on moral principles, what does it mean when God challenges them?*

\*\*The implication of the story is that many social customs are thought to be based on moral principles but don’t really have a moral basis. It’s then a judgment call whether you live by them even if they are not justified by moral principles. E.g., Jesus has no women in the Twelve but associates with prostitutes; Paul thinks the Corinthian women should cover their heads in worship but urges Philemon to treat his slave in a new way.

*A couple of questions about God’s participation*

1. *Did God already decide to make any son of Boaz as David’s ancestor? Or, did it happen because of Ruth?*
2. *If Ruth and Boaz never got together, then Obed wouldn’t be born, so on to Christ or David, which would be the downfall of the Jews and eventually humanity. So does that mean that there is predestination? Are our choices our own?*

\*\*The story doesn’t refer to God’s role; it focuses on people as making their choices. God then works through them and their consequences. No doubt you could say that God knew ahead of time how things would work out. You could even say it was God’s plan. But the story’s focus lies on the human decision-making and the coincidences, as in Esther.

*Why does the story end with Naomi? Why is Ruth’s child determined by the women to be a nourisher of Naomi’s old age? Was that culturally normal for Obed to become Naomi’s son?*

\*\*Obed is the one through whom Naomi and Elimlelek’s family doesn’t die out. Arguably the book is as much Naomi’s story as Ruth’s. (Actually it ends with David.)

*Who wrote this book and what is it main theological relevance that it passed the canonical test?*

\*\*It’s anonymous, and we know nothing about the “canonical test” of this or any book. I assume things worked as they would with prophecies—people heard this story and they recognized it as an expression of God’s truth. It would be the content that grabbed them in this way—what they heard in the way God deals with Elimelek, and Naomi, and Ruth, and David.

*Should Boaz and Ruth be interpreted as Christ and the church, or should Ruth be read strictly as a narrative with big moral importance and guidance?*

\*\*Augustine’s criterion for good interpretation was whether it furthers love, and this application of the story could do so for some people. It doesn’t work for me!

*What do you think about people using Ruth 1:16-18 in wedding ceremonies?*

\*\*Same sex wedding ceremonies?!

*I struggle with why Ezra and Nehemiah made those with foreign wives send the wives and children out, while Boaz married a foreign wife. The inconsistencies of things like this challenge me. I struggle with how far we can go in our lamenting to God before He will say to us, “Stand up and take it like a man.”*

\*\*The difference is that Ruth had come to acknowledge Yahweh so there was no danger of her leading Boaz into Moabite ways. But yes, God may say to us “Stand up and take it like a man.” Would that be a problem?