July/August 2024 Randall Price

# Ancient Evidence for the Book of Ruth

The book of Ruth records the origin of the Davidic dynasty that reigned over Israel for 400 years. As prophesied, the Messiah, Jesus, descended from King David's line (Mt. 1:1–6) and will reign on his earthly throne in the Millennial Kingdom (1 Chr. 17:11–13; Ezek. 37:25; Lk. 1:32).

Ruth opens by stating the time (during a famine "when the judges ruled") and the place ("Bethlehem, Judah") of its narrative (1:1). Even though "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25) during this period, some followed the Lord; and the foundation of David's house rested on them. The archaeological record helps confirm the historicity of the book's divinely guided events.

Ruth begins with a statement of a historic event, a widespread famine so severe it forced Elimelech and his Ephrathite family to move from Bethlehem to the desert region of Moab. After 10 years and the deaths of her husband and sons, Naomi returned to her homeland with her daughter-in-law Ruth when Naomi heard the Lord ended the famine in Israel (Ruth 1:6). God both sent and removed the famine for His purpose: to bring the Moabite widow Ruth to Israel and to establish the Davidic dynasty through her and her husband, Boaz.

In 2013, environmental scientists from Tel Aviv University and the University of Bonn disclosed their research findings of ancient pollen grains that attested to successive droughts, indicating a lengthy famine throughout the Levant, the region that included Canaan (Israel), from 1250 to 1100 BC (the biblical Judges period, Judg. 11:26).[1] God warned the Israelites of divine discipline, including famine, if they continued to break His covenant (Lev. 26; Dt. 28).

According to the scientists' research, the land experienced a dramatic decrease in Mediterranean trees (pines, oaks, and carobs), which require large amounts of water, and an increase in dry-climate trees (olives). This shift may have contributed to the mysterious "Bronze Age Collapse" in the Levant and could

explain why Elimelech's family moved east toward the Middle East plains and away from the Mediterranean region.

The names of Elimelech and Naomi's sons, Mahlon (meaning "sick") and Chilion (meaning "wasting away"), suited malnourished children in a famine setting.[2] Having occurred within the Late Bronze Age, the account of Ruth offers evidence that the famine happened when and how the Bible described.

The book's events largely took place in the town of Bethlehem. These highlands were sparsely populated; and Bethlehem was probably a simple pastoral village on or near Ephrath ("fertile place"), where the Jewish patriarch Jacob buried his wife Rachel (Gen. 35:19, 48:7). *Bethlehem* means "house of bread," and its reputation for abundant harvests earned it the name "Bethlehem Ephrathah" (Mic. 5:2). It also may have served as a home base for seminomadic shepherding families. *Bethlehem* first appears in a 14th-century BC letter from Abdu-Heba, the Canaanite king of Jerusalem (EA 290.14–18), as "Bit-Lahmi" or "Bit-NIN.IB."[3]

A 2012 excavation conducted by Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron for the Israel Antiquities Authority uncovered a 2,700-year-old clay fiscal bulla (a round stamp affixed to an item) on the eastern slope of the city of David in Jerusalem, merely four to five miles from Bethlehem. The paleo-Hebrew script on the bulla reads, "In the seventh (year). Beit Lehem. For the king." It appears this bulla sealed a particular tax shipment (possibly an agricultural product) sent from Bethlehem for the king of Judah during the seventh year of a Judean king, possibly Josiah or Manasseh. This discovery is the first Hebrew inscription unearthed that mentions Bethlehem, the birthplace of Ruth's descendants King David (Ruth 4:11, 22) and Jesus the Messiah (Mt. 2:1).

Thus, the small but significant archaeological details related to the book of Ruth support the Bible's accuracy and God's overarching plan of salvation.

**ENDNOTES**

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1. D. Langgut, I. Finkelstein, T. Litt, “Climate and the Late Bronze Collapse: New Evidence from the Southern Levant,” *Semantic Scholar* (November 1, 2013).
2. Christopher Eames, “Evidence for Ruth’s Famine—From Ancient Pollen?” Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology (August 5, 2020), (tinyurl.com/Famine-Pollen).
3. Erik K. DiVietro, *The Book of Ruth: Backgrounds and Considerations* (December 22, 2020), (tinyurl.com/Ruth-Background).



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