

Book of Ruth
Medieval to Modern

FEBRUARY 14–JUNE 14, 2020

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The
Morgan
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SUMMARY IN A SINGLE INITIAL

Single leaf from a Bible, in Latin

France, ca. 1260

Gift of the Estate of Belle da Costa Greene, 1951;

MS M.851.1

Within the initial *I* that commences the book of Ruth (as the first letter of *In diebus*—“In the days”), the entire narrative is succinctly summarized. At top is Naomi departing Bethlehem (the name of Beth-Lechem in the Christian tradition) for Moab because of famine. Her husband, Elimelech, is not shown. Below, their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, accompany her. Beneath the boys are their future wives, Ruth and Orpah. Following the deaths of her husband and sons, Naomi returns to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law Ruth, who, as shown in the next image, weds Boaz. Below them stands the fruit of that marriage: their son, Obed, followed by his son, Jesse.

By ending with an image of Jesse, father of King David, this series of scenes highlights the important role Ruth played as a progenitor of the royal House of David.

RUTH'S BACKSTORY I

Bible, in French

France, Paris, ca. 1275–80

**Illuminated by the Charlemagne Master and the
Paris-Acre Master**

Purchased by Pierpont Morgan, 1912; ms M.494, fol. 169r

In medieval Bibles and other religious manuscripts, the book of Ruth was customarily illustrated with a single picture.

One tradition was to depict the text's opening scene: Naomi with her husband, Elimelech, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, leaving Bethlehem for Moab because of famine. It may strike today's viewers as odd that Ruth, who later in the story marries Mahlon, is nowhere to be seen in the single picture that illustrates her book. Medieval artists, however, often illustrated only what is mentioned in the first lines of the text they were commissioned to illuminate.

The highly burnished gold background in the image and foliate initial, typical of Gothic illumination, is of the kind that inspires artist Barbara Wolff.

RUTH'S BACKSTORY II

***Bible historiale*, in French**

France, Paris, ca. 1415

Illuminated by the workshop of the Boucicaut Master

Purchased by Pierpont Morgan, 1910; ms M.394, fol. 114r

This fifteenth-century depiction of the journey of Naomi, Elimelech, and their two sons from Bethlehem to Moab eschews the burnished-gold background of the adjacent manuscript in favor of an evocative landscape with mountains and sky. The lush trees, flowering plants, and burbling wellhead of the scenery suggest that the family's trek is near its end: they have reached the fertile land of Moab.

NAOMI'S DESPAIR

***Speculum humanae salvationis* (Mirror of Human Salvation),
in Latin and Dutch**

Belgium, Bruges, ca. 1450

Illuminated by a Master of the Gold Scrolls

**Purchased by Pierpont Morgan, 1909; ms M.385,
fols. 28v–29r**

The *Mirror of Human Salvation* was a medieval tract that identified episodes of the Old Testament as prefigurations for events of the New Testament. At left, Mary receives the dead body of her son, Christ. Her great sorrow was prefigured by three Old Testament incidents: Jacob's shock upon seeing the bloody coat of his (presumably dead) son Joseph; Adam and Eve's mourning the murdered Abel; and, lastly, Naomi's lamenting the deaths of her husband and sons. In the Bible, she wails, "Do not call me Naomi [beautiful], but call me Mara [bitter]. For the Almighty has greatly filled me with bitterness." Although Ruth is not depicted, her presence is implied: the first chapter of her book is cited as the source of the episode.

AN ELABORATE CYCLE I

**Crusader Bible, added inscriptions in Latin, Persian,
and Judeo-Persian**

France, Paris, ca. 1250

Purchased by J. P. Morgan, Jr., 1916; ms M.638, fol. 17v

In a rare exception to the medieval norm, the Morgan's famous Crusader Bible contains an elaborate illustrated Ruth cycle. It spreads over five folios, three of which are exhibited here. At the top of this page, Boaz asks the identity of Ruth and grants her permission to glean with the other women in his field. Below, at left, Ruth accepts Boaz's invitation to join him in a meal while, at right, workers stack his abundant crop of barley sheaves.

AN ELABORATE CYCLE II

**Crusader Bible, added inscriptions in Latin, Persian,
and Judeo-Persian**

France, Paris, ca. 1250

Purchased by J. P. Morgan, Jr., 1916; ms M.638, fol. 18r

In this second folio from the Crusader Bible, Ruth threshes her gleanings and brings the grain to her appreciative mother-in-law, Naomi. Apprised that the field where Ruth had gleaned belongs to Boaz, Naomi reveals that he is her kinsman. She counsels Ruth to perfume herself and put on her best garments. In the image at bottom, while workers finish threshing Boaz's crop, Ruth quietly slips in to where Boaz sleeps and, following Naomi's instruction, uncovers his feet and lies down.

The back of this folio, continuing the narrative, depicts Boaz's agreeing to marry Ruth.

AN ELABORATE CYCLE III

**Crusader Bible, added inscriptions in Latin, Persian,
and Judeo-Persian**

France, Paris, ca. 1250

Purchased by J. P. Morgan, Jr., 1916; ms M.638, fol. 19r

The Ruth cycle in the Crusader Bible concludes with the top register of this folio. Ruth, now married to Boaz, has had a son, Obed. Still in bed, she gestures toward Naomi, who gently holds the infant. Neighboring women congratulate the family upon the birth of a boy who will be the grandfather of King David.

Illustrations for the first book of Samuel fill the bottom register. While Elkanah offers a lamb as a sacrifice, his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah, follow with his five sons

FIRST ENCOUNTER BETWEEN RUTH AND BOAZ

Bible, in Latin

England, perhaps Oxford, ca. 1265

**Gift of the Trustees of the William S. Glazier Collection,
1984; MS G.42, fol. 78r**

The elongated initial *I* (*In diebus*—“In the days”) that starts the book of Ruth in this Bible, decorated with foliate tendrils and fanciful beasts, is historiated at its top. The scene depicts the moment in which Boaz, tall and holding a rod of authority, learns Ruth’s identity and grants her permission to glean in his field after the workmen have finished their reaping. This first encounter between the two sets off a chain of events that will result in their marriage.

RUTH CARRYING GRAIN I

Bible, in Latin

France, Paris, ca. 1250

Illuminated by the Christina Workshop

**Gift of the Trustees of the William S. Glazier Collection,
1984; MS G.31, fol. 76v**

Manuscripts along the opposite wall in this exhibition display the tradition of illustrating the book of Ruth with depictions of Naomi and her family departing Bethlehem for Moab. The tall initial *I* used in this Bible to commence the book of Ruth exemplifies the second main medieval tradition for illustrating the text. It portrays the moment when Ruth, having gleaned in Boaz's field, returns to her waiting mother-in-law with bundles of grain that will feed them. Ruth's outsider status within her chosen community of Bethlehem (as a Moabite, she is from a proscribed people) is highlighted by the suspicious looks that three women, appearing at the windows of their dwellings, cast upon the solitary Ruth.

RUTH CARRYING GRAIN II

Bible, in Latin

France, perhaps Paris, ca. 1245–50

Illuminated by the Morgan 92 Group

Purchased by Pierpont Morgan, 1907; ms M.269, fol. 86v

The slender initial *I* commencing this book of Ruth offers another example of the medieval tradition for illustrating the biblical text with a scene of Ruth carrying bundles of grain. The wavy lines above her head indicate that she is walking outdoors, en route to Naomi, who is shown anxiously awaiting her daughter-in-law's return. As in the adjacent manuscript, Ruth's outsider status is indicated by wary looks from two men peering from a window.

MARRIAGE OF RUTH AND BOAZ

Bible, in Latin

Bohemia, Prague or Raudnitz, 1391

**Illuminated by the Samson Master, the Morgan Master,
and others**

Purchased in 1950; ms M.833, fol. 88r

In this Bible, the initial at the beginning of the book of Ruth contains a rare scene of Ruth and Boaz in bed. This is their marriage bed, in which they peacefully sleep. It represents the successful closure of the difficulties that Ruth endured in her widowhood and upon her arrival in Bethlehem. She and Boaz will have a son, Obed, who will beget Jesse, the father of King David. This scene is not to be confused with the episode, illustrated in the Crusader Bible exhibited nearby, in which Ruth uncovers the feet of the sleeping Boaz and prostrates herself.

This manuscript retains some of the silk curtains that were sewn above the illuminations to protect them from abrasion.

TREE OF JESSE

Leaf from the Eadwine Psalter

England, Canterbury, Christ Church Priory, ca. 1150

Purchased in 1927; ms M.724v

A large portion of this complex page is devoted to the Tree of Jesse, the medieval visualization of Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah would spring from the family of Jesse, the father of King David. From the prone Jesse grows a populous genealogical tree, at the top of which are the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ. Christian theology underscored Ruth's genealogical role as the mother of Jesse's father, Obed, and as the great-grandmother of David, which thus also made her an ancestor of the Savior.

Scenes illustrated in the surrounding squares include, from top left: David being proclaimed king and leading the battle against Zion, three episodes from the life of St. John the Baptist, and the birth of Christ.

BINDING THE BOOK OF RUTH

**Custom binding for the Joanna S. Rose Illuminated
Book of Ruth**

United States, New York, 2017

**Designed by Rudi Wolff and fabricated by Judith Ivry,
with gold lettering by Joshua Marrow**

Gift of Joanna S. Rose, 2018; MS M.1210A

The Joanna S. Rose Illuminated Book of Ruth, displayed in the center of this room, finds appropriate housing in a modern “treasure binding.” Its box, custom-designed by artist Barbara Wolff’s husband, Rudi, is covered in shot silk. The top cover is decorated with 24-karat gold lettering by master silversmith Joshua Marrow that reads, in Hebrew, “Your people shall be my people and your God shall be my God.” These were the words spoken by Ruth when she refused to abandon her mother-in-law and chose to adopt Naomi’s clan and religion.

Above your head and encircling the room is a partial reproduction of the landscape painted in the Rose Book of Ruth. The panorama traces the geographic arc of Naomi and Ruth's story. It follows the journey from famine in Beth-Lechem to safety in the fertile land of Moab, and a return to once again bountiful fields. It ends with an image of Jerusalem, set on a hilltop amid the forests of the Judean mountains.

THE JOANNA S. ROSE ILLUMINATED BOOK OF RUTH

**The Joanna S. Rose Illuminated Book of Ruth,
in Hebrew and English**

United States, New York, and Israel, Jerusalem, 2015–17

Commissioned by Joanna S. Rose, written by Izzy

Pludwinski, designed and illuminated by Barbara Wolff

Gift of Joanna S. Rose, 2018; MS M.1210

The Rose Book of Ruth is a vellum accordion-style manuscript of the biblical text of the book of Ruth, written in Hebrew on one side and in English on the other. Commissioned by Joanna S. Rose, the eighteen-foot-long work was created by New York artist Barbara Wolff in collaboration with calligrapher Izzy Pludwinski. Colored imagery and a continuous landscape decorate the Hebrew side of the manuscript, with accents and lettering in silver, gold, and platinum.

In contrast to the medieval artists, Wolff depicts few human figures to tell the story. Instead, through biblical exegesis and research, she depicts the objects the characters would have touched, handled, or worn.

MARRIAGE AND THE BIRTH OF OBED

To the right, Ruth, having slept at the feet of her kinsman Boaz, quietly leaves his tent just before day breaks. To the left is the sandal removed by Ruth's nearest (but unnamed) male relative, a signal that he yields to Boaz the right to marry her. Nearby is an elaborate marriage belt representing the union between Ruth and Boaz. Thus a story that begins with famine ends in a fruitful marriage, as symbolized by the child's toy on the following folio.

RUTH CLINGS TO NAOMI

To the right, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to remain in their native land, Moab, following the deaths of their husbands. On the next folio, Ruth refuses to abandon Naomi, and they embrace before setting off for Beth-Lechem together. To the left are images of wheat and barley, representing the abundant harvest that greets the two women upon their arrival.

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Executed in stark black ink, the images on the English side of the Rose Book of Ruth function like an archaeological gloss to the text. They illustrate tools, weights, pottery, and other artifacts typical of the early Iron Age, in which the story is set. The vignettes offer a deeper historical and agricultural understanding of the text and its narrative.

THE TIME OF THE JUDGES

Toward the center, three statuettes of early Iron Age fertility goddesses appear, with their hands supporting their large breasts. To the right are three sickles; two querns (hand grindstones used to make grain into flour); and, for baking bread, a clay oven shaped like a beehive.

CELEBRATING THE UNION OF RUTH AND BOAZ

To the left are an Iron Age mirror and comb, followed by eating and cooking utensils. Toward the center, Wolff depicted six wine goblets, viticulture having been introduced in the Near East by the third millennium BCE.