A MIDRASHIC VIEW OF RUTH
AMIDST A SEA OF AMBIGUITY

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INTRODUCTION

> Simple glass reflects the beam of light that shines on it only once. A precious gem, in contrast, reflects different sparks with its many facets; a single beam of light that shines on it is reflected and is returned to us greatly enhanced.[1]

We may use this analogy as a guide for understanding a literary gem, the Book of Ruth. At first blush, this idyllic tale brings joy to the biblical reader. Seldom do we come across such an ideal society, characterized by *hesed*, with superheroes and no villains. At worst, there are average characters (such as Orpah, Boaz' foreman, and the anonymous So-and-So) who serve as foils to highlight the greatness of Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth.[2] It is hardly surprising that in a recently published collection of essays on Book of Ruth, many authors cite R. Ze'ira's classic midrashic statement:

> R. Zei'ra said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanliness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness (Ruth Rabbah 2:14).[3]

Although *hesed* is the predominant theme of the Book of Ruth, we need to consider how to define that *hesed*, and what other religious lessons emanate from the text. Which characters truly epitomize R. Ze'ira's statement? What is the relationship between Divine and human *hesed*? The author of Ruth challenges the reader to delve beneath the surface to uncover the subtler messages of this complex narrative.

In a recent article on the syntactic ambiguity of Ruth 2:20, Mordechai Cohen posits two criteria for ascertaining deliberate ambiguities in a biblical text:

1. One must establish the cogency of two separate readings.
2. One must show how the ambiguity contributes to the literary context by expressing something that could not be expressed in unambiguous language.[4]

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Taking this argument to a different level, one might contend that much in the Book of Ruth can fit these criteria. Many literary elements that initially appear clear in Ruth can be proven more elusive on further inspection. As will be shown below, various midrashic interpretations capture these textual ambiguities by demonstrating the multidimensional possibilities of interpretation.

Rather than limiting ourselves by adopting one side or another, it is preferable to weigh the differing opinions against one another in order to appreciate how these viewpoints can co-exist. What emerges is a more complex, comprehensive understanding of the text and its messages.

THE FIRST FIVE VERSES OF RUTH: PUNISHMENT FOR SINS?

Analyzing the opening verses of Ruth, one might deduce from the text that Elimelech and his sons deserved their deaths. Elimelech left the Land of Israel and a starving community behind, while his sons intermarried in Moab. The juxtaposition of Elimelech's leaving Israel and his death, and the juxtaposition of the sons' intermarriages and their deaths might yield these conclusions.[5]

Alternatively, one might challenge these associations. There was a 10-year gap between the sons' marrying Moabites and their own deaths (1:4). By calling attention to the lengthy time separating the two events, the text appears to exclude intermarriage as a direct cause of their deaths. We also are not told how long Elimelech remained in Moab before he died.

These uncertainties yield at least three major lines of interpretation:

1. Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion simply died: They legitimately left during a famine, and nothing sinful occurred. These verses are primarily background to the main story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, and should not be scrutinized for any theological significance of punishment for sins.

2. This story is parallel to Job: Like Job, Naomi first complained about her God-given lot (1:20-21), but was restored to happiness by the end of the narrative. From this point of view, the deaths and suffering at the outset of Ruth are theologically significant, but the reader is not told how.

Unlike Job, however, where God's direct involvement is discussed in the beginning and end of the book, in Ruth it is not. Additionally, the human characters in Ruth played an active role in changing their fate, whereas Job did not. It is unclear whether Ruth was intended to parallel Job, or whether the two books were meant to be contrasted, with the characters in Ruth held more responsible for their original suffering, and given more credit for their eventual happiness.

3. This is a story of sin/punishment and then *hesed*/reward: Elimelech and his family insensitively left a starving community behind. The unwarranted lingering of Mahlon and Chilion in Moab led them to intermarry. Likewise, the happy ending of Ruth may be viewed as God's reward for the *hesed* displayed by Boaz, Naomi, and Ruth.

Does the text itself yield a sin/punishment conclusion? It remains possible, but no more compelling than a non-sin/punishment reading. This uncertainty encapsulates our difficulty in pinpointing any one specific interpretation of the ephemeral characters in the opening verses of the Book of Ruth.

NAOMI

Ruth 1:1-2 immediately presents an inner tension over the extent of Naomi's involvement in her family's affairs: was she a passive follower of her husband, or an active participant in the abandonment of the community (assuming that there *was* anything negative about their leaving!)? Midrashim address both sides of the question: "He was the prime mover, and his wife secondary to him, and his two sons secondary to both of them" (Ruth Rabbah 1:5). "Why did the text mention him, his wife, and his children? To teach that all of them were stingy" (Ruth Zuta 1:2).

From the text, it is difficult to determine whether Naomi did anything wrong, if she was an innocent victim of the sins of the members of her family, or if she suffered from their unexplained deaths. These two midrashic comments underscore the ambiguity found in the text.

The full range of motives behind Naomi's valiant efforts to persuade her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab also is elusive. Although Naomi emphasized only the marital prospects of Ruth and Orpah (1:8-15), it is possible that she was driven by other considerations as well.

> R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Judah b. Hanina: Three times is it written here *'turn back'*, corresponding to the three times that a would-be proselyte is repulsed; but if he persists after that, he is accepted (Ruth Rabbah 2:16).

> Why did Naomi want to return them? So that she would not be embarrassed by them. We find that there were ten markets in Jerusalem, and they [i.e., the classes of people who shopped at each] never intermingled . . . . The people were recognized by their clothing – what one class wore, another would not . . . . (Ruth Zuta 1:8).

These midrashim offer substantially different insights into Naomi's efforts. Ruth Rabbah 2:16 views Naomi as being theologically sensitive, unwilling to compromise Jewish religious standards. This view might receive textual support from Naomi's observation that Orpah's return to Moab came with religious consequences as well: *So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people, and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law'* (1:15).

Ruth Zuta 1:8, in contrast, depicts a less flattering aspect of Naomi – her professed concern for the welfare of her Moabite daughters-in-law cloaked a desire to protect her own noble self-image in Judean society. The inordinate emphasis on Ruth as a "Moabite" (seven times in this tiny book!) could support this reading as well.

Regardless of the motivations underlying her generosity, Naomi certainly emerged as a winner by the end of the narrative. She had her estate redeemed by her wealthy relative Boaz; she was the toast of the town; and she even adopted Ruth's child. How might one view this happy ending from a religious perspective?

It appears that there are several textually valid readings relating to the character of Naomi:

Hesed: Who could ask for a better mother-in-law than Naomi? She begged her daughters-in-law to return to Moab, so that they would be in a comfortable environment (1:8-15). Naomi, bereft of her husband and sons, with only Ruth and

Orpah to comfort her, was more concerned with their welfare than tending to her own loneliness. Moreover, Naomi never stopped caring for Ruth, helping her find security via matrimony. Naomi emphasized her selfless motives when she stated, '*Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy*' (3:1). We also may add the potential religious idealism in Naomi's sincere concern
with the theological consequences of taking them back with her to Israel (conversion issues). As a consequence of her *hesed*, God rewarded Naomi with family, friends, and land (4:14-17).

More self-centered: Although Naomi consistently expressed an interest in her daughters-in-law, she really was more concerned for herself. She joined her family when they abandoned their community and went to Moab. She wanted to drive her Moabite daughters-in-law away because they embarrassed her and would harm her social status upon return. Although Naomi continued to stress Ruth's needs, she was quite aware of her own land and how she might personally benefit from Boaz' intervention. Therefore, she orchestrated the encounter between Boaz and Ruth to help herself. Fittingly, the narrative concludes with Naomi's happiness – she took the child, and had the blessings of her friends and her land. Ruth is only a tangential figure in the megillah's climactic frame.

Complexity: Naomi was concerned with herself, and also for Ruth. One might view the happy ending either as a consequence of Naomi's (and the other characters') actions, or as a providential reward for her goodness (see further discussion below). This view combines the above explanations, and each layer of motivation appears to be sustained by the text. The different layers of motivation, already discerned by rabbinic midrashim, deepen our understanding of Naomi.

BOAZ

From the plain reading of the text, Boaz emerges as a true hero. He protected Ruth from harassment (2:9,15), and helped her in other ways unbeknownst to her (2:15-17). He provided sustenance for Naomi (3:15), completed the redemption of Naomi's field, and married Ruth (3:18-4:10).

There is a basic problem in the narrative, however: Boaz allowed Ruth to glean for approximately three months (cf. Ruth Rabbah 5:11), and he needed

overt prodding from Naomi and Ruth before he took more substantial action. Why did he not help earlier, especially given his awareness of Ruth's outstanding character (2:11-12)?

The Moabite issue may figure decisively in answering that question. But was Ruth's background a legitimate cause for delay, or an excuse for inaction? Once confronted with Ruth at the threshing floor, Boaz acknowledged that everyone knew Ruth to be a woman of valor, and that she *did* have other marital options within that society (3:10-11). More significantly, the Moabite excuse could explain only Boaz' possible reluctance to *marry* Ruth. How do we justify his allowing her to beg in his field for so long? As Feivel Meltzer observes, "it is impossible to understand adequately why Boaz did not see it fit to visit the widows and attend their needs."[6]

Eschewing a one-dimensional reading of Boaz, some midrashim cast Boaz as one who acted kindly only when he knew he would receive something in return:

> R. Isaac commented: The Torah teaches you that when a person performs a good deed he should do so with a cheerful heart . . . . If Boaz had known that the Holy One, blessed be He, would have it written of him that he *Gave her parched corn* (2:14), he would have given her fatted calves! (Lev. Rabbah 34:8).

> Rabbah, son of R. Huna, said in the name of Rab: Ibzan is Boaz. What does he come to teach us [by this statement]? . . . Boaz made for his sons a hundred and twenty wedding feasts, for it is said, *And he* [Ibzan] *had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he sent abroad, and thirty daughters he brought in from abroad for his sons; and he judged Israel seven years* (Jud. 12:9); and in the case of everyone [of these] he made two wedding feasts, one in the house of the father and one in the house of the father-in-law. To none of them did he invite Manoah, [for] he said, 'Whereby will the barren mule repay me?' All these died in his lifetime (Bava Batra 91a).

It appears that these midrashim were sensitive to the fact that Boaz spoke generously to Ruth, but actually treated her with only moderate generosity. Boaz speaks more than any other figure in Ruth (21 verses for him, 17 for

Naomi, 11 for Ruth), but his flowery talking did not necessarily fully match his actions.

As an excuse for his inaction, Boaz himself suggested only that he was an older man: *He said, 'Be blessed of the Lord, daughter! Your latest deed of loyalty is greater than the first, in that you have not turned to younger men, whether poor or rich'* (3:10). Boaz' lavish praise of Ruth's *hesed* in this verse may combine his genuine admiration of Ruth's loyalty to preserve Mahlon's name, and Boaz' more personal desire to marry her.

To summarize: Boaz certainly is a paragon of *hesed*. At the same time, however, some midrashim perceive a disparity between his speech and his actions, and view Boaz' *hesed* as motivated at least partially by his own interests. Both lines of interpretation are amply and simultaneously supported by the text.

DIVINE-HUMAN CONTINUUM IN RUTH

Mordechai Cohen points to the apparent ambiguity in 2:20: *Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, 'Blessed is he to the Lord, who has not abandoned His kindness with the living and with the dead.'* or *Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, 'Blessed to the Lord is he who has not abandoned his kindness with the living and with the dead.'*

The reader is left unsure if Naomi recognized God for orchestrating the upward turn of events, or whether Naomi blessed Boaz for his efforts in treating Ruth well and for his potential as a redeemer. Cohen views this verse as deliberately ambiguous, intended to highlight the complex relationship between human and Divine action in Ruth.[7]

One also may consider the unusual phrasing in 2:3: *As luck would have it, it was the piece of land belonging to Boaz.* This hardly was a coincidence; it was Divine providence. This ambiguity runs through all of Ruth, as the reader often cannot tell where human initiative stops and God's intervention begins.

Once again, the text could be understood equally well in several ways. While Boaz blessed Ruth by saying that God should reward her for coming under His wings [*tahat kenafav*] (2:12), Ruth eventually realized that nothing would get done unless Boaz would actively spread his "wings" over Ruth [*uparastah kenafekha al amatekha*] (3:9). Earlier, Naomi had prayed that God grant marital security [*menuhah*] to her daughters-in-law (1:9), but she ulti-

mately was required to manipulate the threshing-floor scene to provide that security [*mano'ah*] for Ruth (3:1). One might view the happy ending in the megillah as a consequence of the concerted actions of the characters. It is equally possible to view the human actions as mirroring God's plan – the Divine blessings people had wished on one another had been fulfilled.

It is noteworthy that the only two times the narrator mentions God's involvement are with the end of the famine (1:6), and with Ruth's pregnancy (4:13). Both references are relatively minor in the overall flow of the narrative, leaving the reader unclear about the extent of God's involvement in the rest of the Book of Ruth. Is the megillah teaching that God "withdrew" Himself to allow for human action, or is it intended to reveal God's providential Hand constantly assisting these paragons of *hesed*?

OVERALL MESSAGES OF THE MEGILLAH

From the above examples, it appears that a primary message of the Book of Ruth is that *hesed* is often ambiguous, and human motivations are extremely complex. Additionally, people often are unsure of the boundaries between Divine providence and human action. We have demonstrated the cogency of separate readings of Elimelech and his sons, Naomi, Boaz, and the Divine-human continuum. These ambiguities contribute substantially to the literary context by expressing something that could not be expressed in unambiguous language. The rabbis of the Midrash detected these ambiguities, and used them to draw attention to the various facets of the text and its characters.

There is one character in this megillah, however, who is less ambiguous than the others: Ruth. Ruth reflects genuine loyalty. She sacrificed heroically to accompany Naomi and to accept God. Ruth is compared to Abraham in leaving her family to serve God:

> *The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing'* (Gen. 12:1-2).

> *Boaz said in reply, 'I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your*

> *father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before*' (Ruth 2:11).

Through this comparison, one might argue that Ruth is portrayed even more favorably than Abraham. God had spoken directly to Abraham, and promised him reward. In contrast, Ruth came to Israel voluntarily, and hardly could have expected anything but a lifetime of begging and discrimination in return for her sacrifices. Ruth also avoided marriage opportunities with younger Judeans in order to marry Boaz to preserve Mahlon's name.

Ruth lived in a world where ambiguity was pervasive: God's intervention or lack thereof in her suffering and salvation, and the motivations of the members of the society on whom she depended. Nevertheless, she remained steadfast in her commitment to Naomi, Mahlon, and God. Ruth has the distinction of being the *only* biblical woman explicitly called an *eshet hayil* [woman of valor] (3:11). While she struggled mightily to preserve Mahlon's name, she in fact has immortalized her own name, winning the hearts of readers generation after generation.

NOTES

1. F. Meltzer, *Da'at Mikra*, *Hamesh Megillot* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1973), introduction to *Ruth*, p. 3, n. 1.
2. See especially F. Meltzer, p. 8; M. Garsiel, "Literary structure, development of plot, and the goal of the narrator in *Megillat Ruth*" (Hebrew), in *Hagot BaMikra*, vol. 3, ed. E. Menahem (Tel Aviv: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1979) pp. 66-83.
3. *El Asher Telekhi: Studies in Megillat Ruth, Memorial Volume for the Fallen Soldier, Ariel Reviv, of Blessed Memory*, ed. Elisha Buchreis (Jerusalem: Ketav VaSefer publishing, 2002).
4. M. Cohen, "*Hesed*: Divine or human? The syntactic ambiguity of Ruth 2:20," in *Hazon Nahum*: *Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm*, eds. Y. Elman and J. S. Gurock (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1997) pp. 11-38, especially pp. 32-33.
5. See recently G. H. Cohn, "On going down and on return: A study of Ruth 1:1-6" (Hebrew), in *El Asher Telekhi* (Jerusalem: Ketav VaSefer publishing, 2002) pp. 96-100.
6. *Da'at Mikra*, *Hamesh Megillot*, on 2:8, n. 20.
7. See the thorough survey of opinions on this verse in M. Cohen, pp. 11-38. The above translations are from his article, pp. 11-12.