

## **RUTH AND NAOMI: FOREMOTHERS OF DAVID**

**MOSHE REISS**

*No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the Lord . . . (Deut. 23:4).*

God is a vivid though shadowy presence in this theologically-oriented love story (Ruth 1:6,17; 4:13). Ruth's story is a reversal of those of Esther, Joseph and Daniel; they were Israelites who succeeded in a foreign land; Ruth was a foreigner who succeeded in the land of Israel. Moreover, she was a Moabite, upon whom the ban in Deuteronomy 23:4 should have fallen. Indeed, in the first chapters of the Book of Ruth, the author emphasizes *Ruth the Moabitess* (1:22, 2:2) And yet, Yosef ben Kosma and Eliezer ben Yosef declare that the major purpose of the Book of Ruth is to delineate the ancestral line of King David (Zohar Hadash). How, then, did it happen that her success reached so far into the future of the Israelites to King David?

The Torah specifically requires equality for the "stranger" who dwells among the Israelites, as is noted 18 times in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Ruth, a foreigner and a Moabite, has the right to glean in the fields of Judah. When she comes to Bethlehem with Naomi, the two lone women are apparently in need, for Ruth finds it necessary to go into other peoples' fields to gather produce set aside for the poor. She tells Naomi: *'I am going into the field to glean among ears of corn behind someone who may show me kindness'* (2:2).

Though she refers only to gleaning, she may have had in mind finding a husband who would provide for them. By providential "chance," she goes to a field belonging to Boaz, not yet knowing that he is a kinsman of her late

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Israelite father-in-law. Boaz, aware of Ruth's relationship and warmth to Naomi, extends

*hesed* to her, giving her hospitality and protection (2:2-16). Only thereafter does Naomi tell Ruth that Boaz is a kinsman and the *go'el* [redeemer] of the family land.

That Ruth came to the field of Boaz rather than to any other man's property can be attributed to Divine strategy – as though He Who promulgated the law of Deuteronomy 23:4 would make an exception to it.

Naomi, intent on securing a happy future for Ruth, devises her own strategy to make the match with Boaz, an older man but apparently without a wife. The scene now is set at the end of the barley harvest, when master and workers spend the night on the threshing-floor. Her instructions, woman to woman, are quite detailed:

*'Wash and anoint yourself, put on your finest clothes, and go down to the threshing floor. Do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he lies down and go over and uncover his feet and lie down and [perhaps with a slight touch of prophecy, she adds] he will tell you what to do' (3:3-4).*<sup>1</sup>

When Boaz awakes in the dark of the night and finds her there, he asks, *'Who are you?'* She replies, *'I am Ruth your servant.'* Then, without waiting for him to tell her what to do, she adds, *'Spread your cloak over your servant for you are a redeemer'* (v. 9). Boaz, refraining from taking advantage of her, recognizes her as an *eshet hayil* [virtuous woman] (v. 11), the very term her descendant Solomon was to use in Proverbs 31:10.

Boaz is ready to take on the role of *go'el*, but he must first deal with another man who is closer kin to Naomi's husband Elimelech. This unnamed individual had a prior right both to redeem the property and perhaps to marry the widow. The very next morning, Boaz waits in the plaza by the city gate for him to come by, and in the presence of witnesses asks if he is willing to purchase Elimelech's land and thereby keep it in the family line (see Lev. 25:27). The man agrees to purchase the property. Then Boaz raises the separate issue of levirate marriage to the widow as part of the obligation of

the *go'el* (see Deut. 25:5-10). To this the man demurs, because the first son born of the marriage would inherit the property in the name of Ruth's first husband, the son of Elimelech (4:3-6). This refusal clears the way for Boaz himself both to redeem the land and to marry Ruth.

The town elders, who were witnesses to the discussion and the agreement, voice approval with significant comment. *'May God grant that the woman who comes into your house be like Rachel and Leah who together built up the house of Israel'*. They say further: *'And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring the Lord will give you by this young woman'* (4:12). This statement is open to several interpretations. The bonding of Naomi and Ruth reminds one of Leah and Rachel, who were sisters and both of childbearing age. Are the town elders foreseeing that **both** will build the house of Israel? And it may be that they mention Tamar as an ancestress of Boaz because she herself was a Canaanite (Gen. 38:2), a foreign or "strange" woman. This can be understood as foreshadowing the marriage of Ruth the Moabite to an Israelite, though Oved, her son by Boaz, who was to be father of Jesse and grandfather of David, is never mentioned as son of her first husband, as would be appropriate if the levirate marriage were valid.

The talmudic rabbis were well aware of the difficulties in the genealogy. In Yevamot 76b the Talmud tells a strange story:

Doeg the Edomite then said to [Abner], 'Instead of enquiring whether [David] is fit to be king or not, enquire rather whether he is permitted to enter the assembly or not!' 'What is the reason?' 'Because he is descended from Ruth the Moabite.' Said Abner to him, 'We learned: an Ammonite, but not an Ammonite; A Moabite, but not a Moabite!'

This is a very unusual statement, an almost halakhic statement based on a midrash, a story which never took place. Doeg, a member of Saul's command, an evil man who killed 85 priests for helping David (I Sam. 22:18), questions David's legitimacy. Abner, his rival, insists on his legitimacy, and later makes peace with David and helps make him king of all Israel.

It is Abner's statement in the midrash that is accepted as halakha. Raba exclaims on Yevamot 77a:

'Whosoever will not obey the following halakha will be stabbed with the sword; I have this tradition from the Beth Din of Samuel the Ramathite: An Ammonite but not an Ammonitess; A Moabite, but not a Moabites!'

Thus, Ruth being David's great-grandmother is approved by the talmudic sages. However, the strange debate between Doeg and Abner and the bitterness of Samuel's Bet Din's decision suggest that there may have been an underground dissatisfaction in the talmudic academy. There may have been an undercurrent of thought that it was Naomi, rather than Ruth, who was the foremother of David. It could be based on three considerations:

The Book of Ruth tells that the neighboring women cried, *'There is a son born to Naomi.'* This statement is seemingly direct and unequivocal. But Ruth 4:13 has the same women saying to Naomi that the boy-child was *'born to your daughter-in-law.'* One might suggest – since the context strongly implies that Naomi took Ruth's child to nurture – these kindly women indulged in a bit of hyperbole, saying in effect that Naomi now can tend and enjoy the boy-child as if he were her own son.

There is a similar dichotomy in the grammar of certain verses. When, in 3:3-4, Naomi instructs Ruth to go the threshing floor and lie down near Boaz, she says *'v'yarad't* [go down] and *'v'shachavt* [lie down]. In each of these words, the Hebrew orthography has an (unpronounced) "yud" as the last letter. Now, a final "yud" in Hebrew would usually mean "I [Naomi] will go down" and "I [Naomi] will lie down." The letter "yud" has been used for a second-person past tense but only rarely, and the usage was antiquated by the time this text was written. Cheryl Exum translates the verses:

*'Wash and anoint yourself, put on your finest dress, and I [Naomi] will go down* [va'yarad'ti – enunciating the 'yud' at the end] *to the threshing floor. Do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, mark the place where he lies down and go and uncover the place of his feet and I [Naomi] will lie down* [v'shachavti – enunciating 'yud' at the end] *- and he will tell you what to do.*<sup>2</sup>

We are aware that for well over a millennium there were several systems of vocalization and cantillation for the biblical Hebrew text: the Babylonian system, the Land of Israel system, and the Tiberian system. During the times of Saadia Gaon in the 10th century the conflict was very serious. Saadia Gaon accepted the Babylonian system for the text he read and taught his students. The masoretic text that we know today uses the Tiberian system, authorized by Maimonides in the 12th century.<sup>3</sup> The somewhat different vocalization determines how we read and understand the text.

Each of the vocalization systems had a corresponding cantillation system. While today the cantillation signs are used primarily as musical notes for chanting, their original purpose was to define the meter of the word and, most importantly, to define the grammatical structure of the clause. Thus when the Babylonian system determined the vowels for each letter and the trope signs for words in the clause they were denoting their best and most accurate interpretation of the words based on their understanding. Similarly, when the Land of Israel system determined its vowels for each letter and its trope signs for words in the clause, they were denoting their best and most accurate interpretation of the words based on their understanding. When the vowels and cantillation signs were different, the two groups had a different understanding of the meaning of the text. For example, The Ten Commandments [*aseret haddibberot*] as they appear in the Book of Exodus are read twice from the Torah scroll. One time is as the regular portion for Shabbat Yitro, when the reader chants the lower trope, the Land of Israel system, which divides the text of the Ten Commandments into 12 grammatical verses. The other time is on the festival of Shavuot, when the reader chants on the upper trope, which is the Babylonian system that enumerates the Ten Commandments in 10 grammatical verses. The number of Commandments is, of course, the same; the point here is the grammatical structure, not the number, of the *aseret haddibberot*. The authorized Tiberian system included both tropes, the lower and upper ones, in the scroll text.<sup>4</sup>

So we are left with possible dilemmas and contradictions. But that should not disturb us unduly. To quote Maimonides' associate and the scribe who wrote the text authorized by Maimonides, Rabbi Bachya ben Asher:

The scroll of the Torah is [written] without vowels, in order to enable man to interpret it however he wishes . . . . Without vowels man may interpret it, [extrapolating from it] several [different] things, many marvelous and sublime.

The main point is to study the Divine word and make it ours.

#### NOTES

1. This reading is from L. Cheryl Exum "Is This Naomi?" in Mieke Bal, ed, *The Practice of Cultural Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) p. 200. Exum is the Chief Editor of *The Journal of Biblical Literature* and currently the Acting Chief Editor of *The Journal of the Study of the Old Testament* and has published numerous books on the Tanakh.
2. See note 1
3. The Arabic text of the Saadia's Tanakh text of the Book of Ruth is apparently lost.
4. Rabbi Benjamin Slonik (17th-century *posek* and rabbinic commentator) complained about incapable and incompetent readers of his day who often read the passage incorrectly. He explained the reasoning for the different readings. "The custom of Israel is to read the . . . Decalogue on Shavu'ot . . . in order to honor the day on which the Decalogue was given, and for this reason it is read with the grander cantillation [i.e., the Upper Trope]." See: "[http://www.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Shokel/030605\\_HighLowTrope.html](http://www.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Shokel/030605_HighLowTrope.html)"



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**JOEL, HAGGAI, HABAKKUK, PSALMS, PROVERBS,  
CHRONICLES**

Ruth's loyalty to Naomi rewarded by marriage to rich bachelor Boaz! Bible study resource with activities, new ideas, Bible text. What's important about her story? Despite being a Moabite, Ruth was a forebear of the Bible hero King David. Her story is a protest against laws forbidding Jewish men to marry foreigners. Her loyalty to Naomi is what matters, not her nationality. Ruth's story has four parts: Gleaning in the fields at harvest. 1 Naomi and Ruth go to Bethlehem. Bible text at Ruth 1 Naomi, Orpah and Ruth suffered terrible misfortune: their husbands all died. Marooned in Moab, Naomi decided to return to her home in Bethlehem. Ruth, though a Moabite, decided to go with her. They set out on the long journey, arriving in time for the barley harvest. 2 Ruth meets Boaz. Ruth 1:6-22 Ruth stays with Naomi when Naomi returns to Bethlehem. Ruth 2 Ruth gleans in the fields of Boaz. Ruth 4:9-17 Boaz marries Ruth and they have a son named Obed. Additional reading: John 7:42 Christ was to be a descendant of David and be born in Bethlehem. Study the lesson and decide how you want to teach the children the scripture account (see "Preparing Your Lessons," p. vi, and "Teaching from the Scriptures," p. vii). Select the discussion questions and enrichment activities that will best help the children achieve the purpose of the lesson. Materials needed: A Bible for each child. So Naomi gave Ruth careful instructions. Boaz would be at the threshing floor, separating the grain they could eat from the husks and stalks. He would spend the night there, probably to protect the grain from thieves. Ruth should wear her best clothes to the threshing floor and hide until Boaz fell asleep. Next, Ruth should turn over the hem of his long robe so that his feet were uncovered. Then, she should lie down at his feet (not touching him). Ruth did exactly that. Cold feet. Suddenly, Boaz woke up. Maybe his feet were cold and he wanted to tuck them back under the "wings" of his robe. God was working with the family in a special way. Obed became the grandfather of King David. Many generations later, Jesus Christ would be born as part of this family line! Questions.