

# A Woman of Valor Has Been Found: Ruth Amidst a Sea of Ambiguity<sup>1</sup>

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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 (Feivel Meltzer).<sup>2</sup>

We may use this analogy as a guide for understanding a literary gem, Megillat 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* (loyalty, loving-kindness) superheroes, and with no villains. At worst, there are average characters (such as Orpah, Boaz' foreman, and So-and-so) who serve as foils to highlight the greatness of Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth.<sup>3</sup> R. Ze'ira's classic statement captures the essence of the Megillah:

R. Zei'ra said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanness, 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).<sup>4</sup>

Although it appears unambiguous that *hesed* is the predominant theme of our Megillah, there is considerably less clarity over how to define that *hesed*, or what other religious lessons emanate from the text of Megillat Ruth. Which characters truly epitomize R. Ze'ira's statement? What is the relationship between divine providence and human *hesed*? Additionally, what is the connection between Megillat Ruth and the period of the Judges?

In an article on the syntactic ambiguity of Ruth 2:20, Mordechai Cohen sets out two criteria for ascertaining deliberate ambiguities in a biblical text: (1) one must establish the cogency of two separate readings; (2) one must demonstrate how the ambiguity contributes to the literary context by expressing something that could not be expressed in unambiguous language.<sup>5</sup> Taking this argument to a different level, one might contend that much in Megillat Ruth can fit these criteria.

Many elements that initially appear clear are more elusive after further scrutiny. Rather than limiting ourselves to one side or another, it is preferable to see how these viewpoints can coexist. By doing so, one stands to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the text and its messages. In this essay, we will consider some of the major issues of the Megillah with an eye toward its overall purposes.

## The First Five Verses: Punishment for Sins?

Some Midrashim and later commentators contend that Elimelech and his sons deserved their respective deaths. Elimelech left the Land of Israel<sup>6</sup> and a starving community behind,<sup>7</sup> while his sons remained in Moab and intermarried.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For this note and all subsequent notes, see pp. 7-8.

Perhaps the juxtaposition of Elimelech's leaving and his death and the juxtaposition of the sons' intermarriages and their deaths do suggest these conclusions. However, there is a ten-year gap between the sons' marrying Moabites and their deaths. By including the lengthy time separating the two events, the Megillah appears to exclude intermarriage as a direct cause of their deaths.<sup>9</sup> We also are not told how long Elimelech remained in Moab before he died. Additionally, Abraham also left during a famine in Canaan (Gen. 12), and most commentators there justify his behavior.<sup>10</sup> Should Elimelech and his family be held to a higher standard of faith than the *avi ha-ma'minim* (father of true believers)?<sup>11</sup>

These uncertainties yield at least three possible lines of interpretation:

1. *Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion simply died:* They legitimately left during a famine. Ibn Ezra (on 1:2, 15) insists that Ruth and Orpah converted prior to their marriages to Elimelech's sons. From this vantage point, nothing sinful occurred—these verses are primarily background setting the stage for 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 Megillat Ruth was intended to parallel Job, or whether the two books should be contrasted, with Ruth's characters held more responsible for their original suffering, and given more credit for their eventual happiness.<sup>12</sup>

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

Does the text yield a sin/punishment conclusion? This reading is 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 Megillat Ruth.

## Naomi

Was Naomi 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).<sup>13</sup>

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 her family members' sins, or if she was a victim of the unexplained deaths of her family members.<sup>14</sup>

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

R. Shemuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Yehudah 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 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; cf. Ibn Ezra, Malbim).

*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 Megillah!) could support this reading as well.

Despite the potentially complex nature of her generosity, Naomi certainly emerged 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 Ruth's son was born into the family. How might one view this happy ending?

It appears that there are several textually valid readings of Naomi's character:

1. *Hesed*: Who could ask for a better mother-in-law than Naomi? Bereft of her husband and sons, with only Ruth and Orpah to comfort her, Naomi was more concerned with their welfare than in tending to her own loneliness. Moreover, Naomi never stopped caring for Ruth, helping her find security via matrimony. We may add the potential idealism in Naomi's concern with the religious conversion issues related to taking them back with her to Israel. As a consequence of her *hesed*, God rewarded Naomi at the end of the Megillah with family, friends, and land (4:14-17).

2. *More self-centered*: Although Naomi always verbally expressed interest in her daughters-in-law, she really was more concerned for herself. She joined her family in being stingy, abandoning her community. She wanted to drive her Moabite daughters-in-law away because they would harm her social status upon return. Naomi knew she could 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.<sup>15</sup>

3. *Naomi is similar to Job*: she suffered without any explanation, complained against God, and then was restored in the end:

She said to them, Call me not Naomi; call me Mara; for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me (*ki hemar Shad-dai li me'od*) (Ruth 1:20).<sup>16</sup>

As God lives, who has taken away my judgment; and the Almighty, who has tormented my soul (*ve-Shad-dai hemar nafshi*) (Job 27:2).

Although Naomi used similar language as Job (possibly indicating that she viewed herself as suffering unjustly), the narrator remains conspicuously non-committal as to whether Naomi's story indeed parallels that of Job or not.

4. *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 simultaneously sustained by the text.

### **Boaz**

Boaz was a hero. He protected Ruth from harassment (2:9, 15) and helped her in other ways unbeknownst to Ruth (2:15-17). He provided sustenance for Naomi (3:15), completed the redemption of Naomi's field, and married Ruth (3:18-4:10). Boaz deserves praise for overcoming the anti-Moabite biases of Judean society.

However, Boaz allowed Ruth to glean for approximately three months (cf. *Ruth Rabbah* 5:11), and he needed prodding from Naomi and Ruth before he took more substantial action. Why didn't he help earlier, especially given his awareness of Ruth's character and outstanding accomplishments (2:11-12)?

Perhaps the Moabite issue figures 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 an *eshet hayil* (woman of valor), and that she *did* have other marital options within that society (3:10-11). More significantly, the Moabite excuse could explain Boaz' possible reluctance to marry Ruth; but how do we justify his allowing her to beg in his field for so long? As Feivel Meltzer observes (on 2:8, n. 20), "it is impossible to understand adequately why Boaz did not see it fit to visit the widows and attend their needs."

Sensitive to these cues, some Midrashim cast Boaz as one who acted kindly only when he knew he would receive something in return:

R. Yitzhak 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 Rav: 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 perceived that Boaz spoke generously to Ruth, but still required prodding to go beyond allowing Ruth to beg under better than average conditions. Boaz spoke more than any other figure in the Megillah (21 verses for him, 17 for Naomi, 11 for Ruth), but his flowery talking did not fully match his actions.

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

### **Divine-Human Continuum in Ruth**

There is an 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."<sup>17</sup>

It is unclear if Naomi acknowledged 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. Mordechai Cohen views this verse as deliberately ambiguous, intended to highlight the complex relationship between human and divine action in the book of Ruth. This ambiguity runs through all of the Megillah, as it often is unclear where human initiative stops and God's intervention begins.

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 (*u-parastah kenafekha al amatekha*, 3:9). Earlier, Naomi had prayed that God grant marital security (*menuhah*) to her daughters-in-law (1:9); but she ultimately had to orchestrate the threshing floor scene to provide that security (*mano'ah*) for Ruth (3:1). One might view the happy ending 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 explicitly mentions God's involvement are with the end of the famine (1:6), and Ruth's getting pregnant (4:13). This leaves the extent of God's involvement subject to speculation. Does the Megillah teach that God "withdrew" Himself to allow greater human action, or does it reveal God's providential hand constantly assisting these paragons of *hesed*?

### **The Relationship Between Ruth and Judges**

The opening verse of Megillat Ruth connects the narrative to the period of the judges. How is the reader to understand the connection between the Dark Age of Judges, and the

display of *hesed* in Megillat Ruth, where the Judeans were religiously faithful and kind to one another?

R. Yisrael Rozen suggests that the root cause of the failure during the period of Judges was that people were too self-centered. Shiloh—the home of the Tabernacle at that time—is insignificant in Judges (mentioned only twice in passing, in Jud. 18:31; 21:19), symptomatic of the lack of unity during that period.

R. Rozen observes that in Judges, the word *hesed* appears only twice, and both in negative contexts: In Judges 1:24, the tribe of Joseph asks a Canaanite to do them *hesed* by betraying his countrymen and revealing the entrance to Bethel. In Judges 8:35, the Israelites are said *not* to have done *hesed* to Gideon's family after his death. In the tiny book of Ruth, in contrast, the word *hesed* appears three times and plays a central role (1:8; 2:20; 3:10).<sup>18</sup>

Is Megillat Ruth a contrast to the period of the judges, or an organic component of that period? The Megillah does not offer greater precision in dating the narrative than its occurrence in the period of the judges—a period spanning some 350 years. Some Midrashim link Ruth to the time of the earlier judges,<sup>19</sup> while others identify Boaz with the later judge Ibzan (Jud. 12:8).<sup>20</sup> Malbim, followed by R. Rozen, however, suggests a literary interpretation: since the story of Ruth is not dated precisely, the story may be viewed as representative of the entire period.

How Megillat Ruth is representative of the period of the judges, however, remains problematic. Malbim asserts that Megillat Ruth parallels the negativity of Judges—the opening verses demonstrate that people were concerned primarily for themselves, and this selfishness was characteristic of the period. According to Malbim, then, Megillat Ruth's connection to the period of Judges is limited primarily to its opening verses. The remainder of Megillat Ruth, in contrast, is characterized by *hesed*.

Alternatively, one might argue that Megillat Ruth is characteristic of the period, but in a more complex manner. Most people were good, or at least average. However, the unwillingness of tribes and individuals to help one another, demonstrates a general lack of *hesed*. People helped others primarily when they could gain something themselves. The Gemara (*Bava Batra* 91a) cited earlier regarding Boaz—one of the greatest figures of that era—captures this theme. Boaz certainly demonstrated *hesed*; but the Gemara accuses even this hero of not inviting Manoah (Samson's father) to his children's wedding feasts since he would never get a reciprocal invitation. To remedy this societal problem, and to break out from the cycle of the period, they needed an outsider like Ruth to teach them what true *hesed* was. One Midrash captures this message:

God said: may Ruth, who is a convert, and who did not challenge her mother-in-law—come and rebuke Israel who has rebelled against Me (*Ruth Zuta* 1:7).

This Midrash is looking far beneath the surface reading of Megillat Ruth, where the Judeans are not depicted as “rebels.” Rather, the Midrash appears to forge an intimate connection between Megillat Ruth and Judges, and determines the root problem inherent in Israel's society to be consistent with R. Rozen's characterization of that period.

## Conclusion

There is one character in this Megillah who is less ambiguous than the others: Ruth. Ruth reflects genuine *hesed*: 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 (to Ruth), “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 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. The extent of God’s intervention in her suffering and salvation is unclear, and so are the motivations of the members of the society on whom she depended. Nevertheless, she remained steadfast in her commitment to Naomi, Mahlon, and God. Although Midrashim link the ideal woman to other figures as well, Ruth has the distinction of being the *only* biblical woman explicitly called by the epithet *eshet hayil* (woman of valor, 3:11). While Ruth struggled mightily to preserve Mahlon’s name, she in fact has immortalized her own name, winning the hearts of readers generation after generation.

Megillat Ruth is characterized by deliberate ambiguity. Not only are multiple readings possible; these ambiguities are precisely the vehicles through which the short narrative captures so many subtleties in so short a space. These complexities guide readers to delve more deeply into the Megillah and recognize the religious implications for their own lives.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay was not previously published in its full form. An abridged version appeared in *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* 33:2 (2005), pp. 91-99, as “A Midrashic View of Ruth amidst a Sea of Ambiguity” (reprinted in my *Through an Opaque Lens* [New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006], pp. 296-306).

<sup>2</sup> *Da’at Mikra, Hamesh Megillot*, (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1973), introduction to *Ruth*, p. 3, n. 1.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Meltzer, introduction to *Da’at Mikra: Ruth*, p. 8; Moshe Garsiel, “Literary Structure, Development of Plot, and the Goal of the Narrator in Megillat Ruth” (Hebrew), in *Hagot ba-Mikra*, vol. 3, ed. E. Menahem (Tel Aviv: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1979), pp. 66-83.

<sup>4</sup> Translations of passages from the Talmud and Midrash Rabbah (occasionally with minor modifications) are taken from Soncino.

<sup>5</sup> Mordechai 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*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1997), pp. 11-38, especially pp. 32-33.

<sup>6</sup> See *Bava Batra* 91a; *Gen. Rabbah* 25:3; Rashi (on 1:2), Meltzer.

<sup>7</sup> See *Ruth Rabbah* 1:4; *Tanhuma Behar* 3; *Zohar Hadash Ruth* 77b; Rashi (on 1:2).

<sup>8</sup> See *Ruth Rabbah* 2:9; Rashi (on 1:12), Malbim (on 1:4), who maintain that Ruth and Orpah did not convert prior to their marriages to Mahlon and Kilyon. Ibn Ezra (on 1:2, 15) disagrees, as does *Zohar Hadash Ruth* 79a. Rambam (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 5:9) maintains that the family members were punished because they were communal leaders and therefore held to a higher standard of conduct. Malbim adopts a middle position: the initial departure of Elimelech and family was justified, since they went only as a temporary measure (*la-gur*); once they elected to stay permanently, however (*va-yeshevu sham*), they brought punishment upon themselves.

<sup>9</sup> Sensitive to this difficulty, *Tanhuma Buber Behar* 8 states, “For those ten years, God was warning them. When He saw that they were not repenting, He began to strike their camels and cattle—yet they still did not repent. When He saw that they did not repent, immediately (!) ‘Mahlon and Chilion died also.’” See also *Ruth Zuta* 1:4, “This teaches that decrees are suspended for ten years.” Of course, without these modifications, the text is far less clear in presenting their deaths as punishment.

<sup>10</sup> According to the majority opinion, the Torah teaches that in the absence of explicit prophetic instructions, one may not depend on supernatural intervention in times of crisis. See, for example, *Pesahim* 8b; *Kiddushin* 39b; *Bava Kamma* 60b; *Hullin* 142a. For further sources, see *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, vol. 1, s.v. “*en somekhin al ha-nes*,” pp. 679-681. For elaboration on Ramban’s dissenting position, see David Berger, “Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides,” in *Rabbi Moshe Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ., Center for Jewish Studies, 1983), pp. 107-128.

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted, however, that the rest of the Bethlehemites appear to have remained at home and survived the famine while Elimelech left with his family. In contrast, Abraham brought his whole family to Egypt, rather than leaving others behind.

<sup>12</sup> See further discussion in R. Amnon Bazak, “The World is Built on *Hesed*: Between Megillat Ruth and Job” (Hebrew), *Megadim* 18-19 (1993), pp. 169-175.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Rashi, Malbim.

<sup>14</sup> One might detect further criticism of Naomi in Ruth’s opening verses: Mahlon and Chilion did not marry Moabites until after their father’s death. *Akedat Yitzhak* and *Alsheikh* maintain that Mahlon and Chilion waited until Elimelech died to intermarry, since he would have stopped them. Moreover, Naomi chose to remain in Moab long beyond Elimelech’s death—even had she tagged along initially, she did not steer the family back home following the death of her husband.

<sup>15</sup> The dialogue in chapter 4 intimates that Boaz considered Naomi’s field to be the primary element in the redemption altogether; Ruth is mentioned only in passing (4:3, 9-10). E.Z. Melammed (“Megillat Ruth in Light of the Halakhah” [Hebrew], *Sinai* 24 [1961], p. 156), however, maintains that Ruth was the more important aspect of the deal, but Boaz emphasized the field out of respect for Ruth.

<sup>16</sup> Translations of biblical passages (occasionally with minor modifications) are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985).

<sup>17</sup> See the survey of opinions on this verse in Mordechai Cohen, “*Hesed*: Divine or Human? The Syntactic Ambiguity of Ruth 2:20,” pp. 11-38. The above translations are from his article, pp. 11-12.

<sup>18</sup> R. Yisrael Rozen, “The Days When the Judges Judged: Generations of Vanity” (Hebrew), in *El Asher Telekhi: Studies in Megillat Ruth, Memorial Volume for the Fallen Soldier, Ariel Reviv, of Blessed Memory*, ed. Elisha Buchreis (Jerusalem: Ketav va-Sefer publishing, 2002), pp. 159-177.

<sup>19</sup> *Ruth Rabbah* 1:1; *Seder Olam Rabbah* 12; cf. *Makkot* 23a.

<sup>20</sup> *Bava Batra* 91a.