

Megillat Ruth

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As is well known the Jewish custom is to read Megillat Ruth on Shabuot. Yet there are diverse opinions about how and when to read it. Masekhet Soferim¹ records the practice of reading Megillat Ruth with a blessing “*al miqra megilla*” (“on the reading of the scroll”) on Shabuot.

Ruth is read on the end of the first day of “gathering” (*mosa’e yom tob rishon shel `asseret*) until half the book and it is completed at the end of the second day. And there are those who say that all (the megillah readings) are begun on the night after Shabbat before the holiday and thus the people have practiced.... (4:18)

This source records two customs regarding the reading. Interestingly, the popular custom as recorded above is not practiced anywhere today. Currently, there are four customs concerning the reading of Megillat Ruth on Shabuot. The Sephardic custom is not to read the megillah during prayer services at all. Rather, the Megillah is read as part of the “*tiqqun lel Shabuot*” (the portion learned on Shabuot night). It is also read during the holiday; half of the scroll is read on the first afternoon of the holiday and half on the second afternoon (similar to the first custom that Masekhet Soferim recorded.)

The Galician Hassidic groups read the megillah before the second day’s Torah reading (in the diaspora). They read from a humash and not from a scroll and they read individually (“*beyahid*”). The custom of the Mitnagdim is to have the cantor read publicly from either a scroll, if one is available, or from a humash—without a prior blessing. Some groups in Israel who follow the rulings of R. Eliyahu of Vilna, read Megillat Ruth from a scroll with a blessing (Zevin, *Hamoadim behalacha*, pp. 327-328).

Yalqut Shimoni (Yalqut Shimoni Ruth, 596) explained the association of Megillat Ruth with the festival of Shabuot (called “the period of the giving of the Torah” by the sages).

What is the association of “Ruth” with “*Asseret*” (“Gathering Festival”), that it is read during “*Asseret*” at the time of the giving of the Torah? To teach that Torah is only given through affliction and poverty. As it is written: “Your tribe dwells there; O God, in Your goodness You provide for the needy.” (Psalms 68:11)

Other explanations of the association between Ruth and Shabuot include the fact that the main events of Ruth occur during the grain harvest, which is also the season of Shabuot, or that Ruth’s decision to become part of Naomi’s people and to accept her God, is similar to the “conversion” that the Israelites underwent when they became God’s people (Hamanhig, Abudraham). B.S. Jacobsen extended the latter idea, suggesting that since Israel alone received the Torah, there was a need to show that the Torah beckons the righteous of all nations by describing Ruth’s sincere conversion (Netiv Binah vol. 4 p.

¹ Masekhet Soferim, in its present form, dates to the middle of the eighth century, though it is based on much older traditions. It contains rules for production of Torah scrolls and regulations of public Torah reading. It can be found in the common edition of the Babylonian Talmud (along with other “minor tractates”) after Masekhet “Horayot.”

148). Other reasons include Boaz's adherence to the laws of leaving behind grain for the needy, described after the offering to be given on Shabuot in Leviticus 23 (Levush 494); another association is that King David was born on Shabuot and this scroll describes King David's ancestors (Bekhor Shor, Baba Batra 13b).

The Story and Storytelling

The story is simple. An impoverished Israelite widow, Naomi, and her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth, return to Bethlehem after both their husbands died in Moab. Boaz, a wealthy relative of the former father-in-law marries the daughter-in-law and inherits the rights of the deceased. They have a son, Obed, who ends up being David's grandfather. Though simple, the story is a fine example of the art of biblical narrative. Sparse detail, importance of dialogue, "type-scenes," allusion, word-play, poetic-prose, varying perspectives etc. are all used to create a story that is as meaningful as it is interesting to read. Let us examine some of these literary elements.

Literary Foils

The book develops three main characters: Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. It is the interplay between these three that determines the main action of the book. Megillat Ruth highlighted two of these characters, Ruth and Boaz, by using literary "foils." Ruth's character, for example, is displayed by using her sister-in-law Orpah as a foil in a scene leaving Moab with her mother-in-law, Naomi. In this case the foil, Orpah, is very devoted to her mother-in-law, Naomi. She is equal to Ruth in devotion after Naomi's first plea to leave.

And she kissed them farewell. They broke into weeping and said to her, "no, we will return with you to your people."

There is no differentiation between the daughters-in-law...yet. After Naomi's second impassioned plea for them to leave,² there is a contrast between the daughters-in-law.

They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and Ruth clung to her. (1:14)

These both seem to be positive reactions of remaining with Naomi. The attachment between Naomi and her two daughters-in-law is great—"kissing" and "clinging" both

² Naomi's selfless character is palpably depicted in her arguments to her two daughters-in-law:

Turn back, my daughters! Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons in my body who might be husbands for you? Turn back, my daughters, for I am too old to be married. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I were married tonight and I also bore sons, should you wait for them to grow up? Should you on their account debar yourselves from marriage? Oh no, my daughters! My lot is far more bitter than yours, for the hand of the Lord has struck out against me.

Naomi has only her daughters-in-law's best interest in mind and is giving them the best advice she can. Her situation would be better off with her daughters-in-law, yet she does not consider that at all when giving them advice. She does not just make a show of insisting they return to a better situation, she makes reasoned arguments to convince them. Naomi's arguments center around one issue only, the likelihood of there being another chance to continue the name of their deceased husbands.

describe close attachment. We do not know what the result of Naomi's speech was--until Naomi informs us in her next plea to Ruth that Orpah's kiss was a farewell kiss.

So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law."

We are not even sure to whom Naomi is talking until the next verse has Ruth replying. The character "Orpah" highlights Ruth's loyalty by displaying great loyalty, but not as much as Ruth. The conclusion one reaches is that though Orpah is good, Ruth is better.

Boaz is also set off by an anonymous minor character (*peloni almoni*- "so and so") who almost redeems Elimelekh's lands and marries Ruth. Boaz presents the issue to the redeemer as a matter of property rights. The redeemer initially agrees to redeem the property. He demurs when Boaz reveals that he would also have to redeem the wife of the deceased, Ruth.

The redeemer replied, "Then I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own estate." (4:6)

The danger associated with marrying Ruth and how precisely that would "impair his estate" (4:6) is open to various explanations³,*** yet what is clear is that Boaz did not consider these factors when deciding to marry Ruth. Boaz, when first becoming aware of the situation, says:

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. And now, daughter, have no fear. I will do in your behalf whatever you ask, for all the elders of my town know what a fine woman you are. But while it is true I am a redeeming kinsman, there is another redeemer closer than I. Stay for the night. Then in the morning, if he will act as a redeemer, good! Let him redeem. But if he does not want to act as redeemer for you, I will do so myself, as the Lord lives! Lie down until morning. (3:10-13)

Boaz realizes Ruth's loyalty and other qualities. These qualities are the only thing that is driving him to act on her behalf. Boaz's concern is for people, and not for self-gain. Boaz is clearly set apart from this non-redeeming redeemer (Incidentally, note the repetition of the verb *g.a.l.* in these two sections; even the word "egleh" in verse 4:4 is playing with the same string of letters).

The way this anonymous character is introduced into the story creates dramatic suspense. We, the readers, expect and even want the very good man, Boaz, to marry Ruth. We are already aware of his fine character and his concern for Ruth. He is much better than a "so and so," though the other person has the stronger claim. The other

³ Rashi, following a rabbinic opinion, explained that the other redeemer did not properly understand the Torah's prohibition of marrying a Moabite (the rabbinic understanding of Deuteronomy 23:4). He understood the prohibition to apply to men and woman, whereas it only applied to the men. Alternatively, he might be referring to financial ruin with the need to support two more women. Or perhaps the reference is to bringing a source of contention into his family by having a child from a "forced" marriage who might quarrel with his other children. Assuming he was married, then he might be unwilling to marry a second wife with all its associated problems.

redeemer's initial affirmative response to Boaz's informing him of his opportunity to redeem his kinsman's land disappoints us to some extent—until he finally refuses to redeem—because of Ruth, the very reason Boaz sought to redeem.

Symbolism

Another literary technique is the symbolic use of names. Naomi herself makes us aware of the importance of the names by making a play on her name upon returning to Bethlehem. Naomi's name comes from the word N.'M. which means pleasant. When she returned widowed and destitute from Moab the people of Beth Lehem exclaimed in their astonishment, "Can this be Naomi?" Naomi replied:

So not call me Naomi...Call me Mara (bitterness) for Shaddai has made my lot bitter. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. How can you call me Naomi, when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, when Shaddai has brought misfortune upon me. (1:20-21)

The names of the minor characters are not important enough to record (*"peloni almoni"*="so and so", although this might be a way of not mentioning a character whose behavior is less than admirable) and are even symbolic (it is hard to imagine people naming their children "Mahlon" and "Khilyon"="sickness" and "destruction," although symbolic names were sometimes given by prophets and others). Orpah's name probably derives from the word "oref" which means the "back of the neck," the part of the body shown when you turn away from someone, as she ultimately did. The name of the heroine of the story, Ruth, is less clear. One interesting possibility is reflected in the Peshitta (the Syriac translation of the Bible). There her name is "Re'uth" which derives from the word "re'a" which means "friend." This might reflect her loyalty to her mother-in-law. Rabbi S.D. Sassoon explained "Ruth" in another way. "Ruth" would be similar to the Aramaic translation of the word "to inherit" (Hebrew "yarash"= Aramaic "yarat," see the targum to Numbers 24:18; apparently Moabite was similar to aramaic in this respect as the Moabite stone also has the word "yeruta"). Ruth carried with her the inheritance of Elimelekh.

Literary Allusion

In the evening meeting between Ruth and Boaz (chapter 3), the story also alludes to two similar situations— Lot's daughters (Genesis 19:31ff), and Tamar, Yehuda's daughter-in-law (Genesis 38). The three situations have common features, most notably, that there are women who have little prospect of having further children and who take actions to insure their own offspring. Additionally, each of the cases has the death of two husbands. The differences in the Ruth story emphasize Ruth's modesty and Boaz's self-control. Ruth, unlike Lot's daughters, makes only a symbolic advance to Boaz, who had been drinking of his own accord. Lot's daughters get their father drunk and have relations with him. Boaz's self-control, in contrast to Yehuda's impulsive behavior, allows him to follow the proper procedure regarding the more rightful redeemer. Rabbi Sassoon explained that the meeting between Ruth and Boaz is a "tiqqun" (rectification) of the previous two encounters. Ruth is the descendant of the product of the first encounter, Moab, and Boaz is a descendant of a product of the second encounter, Peress. It is the

correction of these earlier encounters that eventually leads to the birth of the ruling dynasty in Israel.

Purpose

Although various interesting suggestions have been proposed⁴, the question of the book's purpose was already raised by the midrash:

R. Ze'ira said: This scroll does not have in it impurity or purity, prohibited or permitted, why was it written? To teach the great reward for those who give graciously (*gomleh hasadim*). (Ruth Rabbah 2:14)

According to R. Zeira the book is about hesed. Ruth, the Moabite, is the character most roundly praised for her "hesed." Yet, it is the Moabite lack of kindness which leads to them being excluded from the "congregation of God" (understood to mean prohibition of marriage).

An Ammonite or a Moabite is not to enter the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation no one from them is to enter the assembly of the Lord, for the ages, on account that they did not greet you with food and with water on the way at your going out from Egypt.... (Deuteronomy 23 4-5; SB)

Ruth is the one who rises above her "breeding" and displays hesed and loyalty. She is obviously worthy of becoming part of God's assembly.

We can now return to the issue raised at the beginning of this essay, namely, the Megillah's association with Shabuot—answering in a homiletic vein. The display of hesed that is the mainstay of this short book is living Torah. Loyalty, commitment, righteous behavior, sexual propriety, respecting the rights of others, concern for the disadvantaged—all elements essential to the Torah—are illustrated in this book. The Torah, whose beginning and end is hesed (Sotah 14a), which was given in this season, is exemplified by the behavior of Ruth and Boaz, the main characters of Megillat Ruth.

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⁴ Amongst the various purposes attributed to the book are:

1) a description of David's ancestry. The book ends with David's genealogy, which is uncharacteristically absent from the book of Samuel.

2) "Presentation of the disagreeable fact of David having a Moabite ancestor in the best possible light" (Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, p. 125). David's Moab kinship could be inferred from the fact that he sends his family to Moab for refuge when he fled from Shaul (see 1 Samuel 22:3-4). The book of Ruth emphasizes that from David's father's side he is from the tribe of Yehuda. His Moabite relative is only his very worthy great-grandmother.

3) Countering the early second-temple opposition to marrying foreign women, including specifically Ammonites and Moabites. (Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 10:29-31; 13:24-27)

4) To show how David's birth was the hand of God acting against significant odds. (Klein, *Olam Hatanakh* p. 74)