



RABBINIC READINGS OF RUTH

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At first glance the Book of Ruth seems to be an unlikely source of much rabbinic interpretation. The story is often seen as a simple tale about country folk, complete with a happy end. That Ruth is a Moabitess who will end up as the ancestress of King David is obviously significant. But what special implications might the rabbis have found in it? Indeed there is one Midrashic comment that pretty much asks this question.

Rabbi Ze'ira said: This scroll contains nothing about uncleanness or cleanness, about what is prohibited or permitted, so why was it written?!

He seems to be parodying the obsession of some of his rabbinic colleagues with finding in every letter of the Torah some legal significance. But he then offers a different reason for valuing the book:

It is to teach you how good is the reward for those who perform deeds of loyalty and love.
(Ruth Rabbah 2:15)

The Hebrew is *'gomlei chasadim'*, and indeed picks up on the theme of *'chesed'*, loyalty and love, that recurs in the Book. Naomi hopes that God will show *chesed* to her two daughters-in-law, just as they have shown *chesed* to their dead husbands (1:8); Naomi, despite her initial bitterness, recognizes God's *chesed* in bringing Ruth and Boaz together (2:20); and Boaz recognizes Ruth's *chesed* in staying with her mother-in-law instead of pursuing her own interests and finding a young man (3:10). Indeed, as Rabbi Ze'ira remarks, it is a significant motif throughout the Book.

Nevertheless, despite Rabbi Ze'ira's inability to detect anything in the Book of Halachah, of Jewish law, it was precisely in that area that it was mined for a particular purpose.

The rabbis, in the aftermath of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, were engaged in re-establishing Jewish life in the context of exile. Without land, king, temple or priest, scattered throughout the known world, a number of strategies were needed to hold these different communities together and ensure their continuity while waiting for God to return them to their homeland. They reconstituted a territorially based nation as an extra-territorial faith community, held together by Jewish law, under the authority of the rabbis.

But who belonged to this community and how did newcomers gain entry? In the Biblical world one became part of a people by settling in the territory and accepting the local god. Thus the Bible speaks of the *'ger'*, the resident alien who had certain rights and responsibilities under the

covenant with God, detailed in the Torah, the constitution of the nation. Full membership of the people in the Biblical period, symbolised by the right to eat the Passover offering, required the final step of circumcision (Ex 12:48). But in this new situation, without land or nation, how did someone become part of the Jewish people?

One way was simply through birth, though under rabbinic law it became birth from a Jewish mother, whereas in the biblical period it appeared to depend on the father. The reason for this change is not clear, nor even the exact point at which it became normative. However, how did an adult enter the covenant? Since Ruth represents the most obvious example in the Bible of a woman who joined herself to the Jewish people, the Book was scoured for evidence as to how this might happen, even in this radically new situation.

This kind of question may well lie behind the historical background of the Book. Boaz himself draws the analogy between Ruth and Abraham. She also 'left her father and mother and the place of her birth' (compare Gen 12:1 and Ruth 2:11) as did Abraham when called by God, thus reinforcing the spiritual dimension of her journey. Indeed Boaz characterises Ruth as 'taking refuge under the wings of the Eternal' (2:12). For rabbinic Judaism, in this new context, it is the affirmation of faith in Israel's God, and not, for example, the wish to marry into a Jewish family, that becomes the primary requirement for accepting a convert.

Did the rabbis really derive laws from the Book of Ruth, or, having devised their laws, simply look within the Book for some kind of sanction for what they had decided? The answer is probably the latter, as some examples will indicate.

Before someone can be considered for conversion, they must obviously approach a rabbinic authority. So how should such a rabbi respond? Though, according to the New Testament, the Jews had been keen on converting, this desire was radically curtailed after the success of Christianity in conquering the Roman Empire, following which conversion proved dangerous for the convert and the one who had helped in the process. The Midrash collection, Ruth Rabbah, records a tradition that already expresses a reluctance to accept a potential convert. In the context of the story, Naomi tries to send her daughters-in-law away, and three times uses the same Hebrew term '*shovnah*', turn back.

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani in the name of Rabbi Yudan son of Rabbi Hanina [said]: In three places it is written here, '*shovnah, shovnah, shovnah*', 'turn back, turn back, turn back' corresponding to the three times they push the potential convert away. But if he persists more than this they accept him. (Ruth Rabbah 2:16)

This testing of sincerity is spelled out further in the Talmud:

Our masters taught: If, at the present time, a man comes seeking to be a proselyte, he should be asked: What makes you wish to be received as a proselyte? Are you not aware that at this time Israel is broken down, pushed about, swept from place to place, driven here and there, and overcome by afflictions? If he says, 'I am fully aware. But I am scarcely worthy of [the privilege of becoming a Jew],' he is to be received at once and instructed in a few minor and a few major precepts.

Another comment adds:

One should take care not to impose on him too many commandments nor go into fine details about them. (Yebamot 47a-b)

However Ruth's persistence, despite Naomi's rejection, is rewarded. Her statement 'do not entreat me to leave you, and return from following you' is read as follows:

'Do not entreat me' – She said to her: do not sin against me, do not turn your misfortunes (from the verb *paga*, translated here as 'entreat') away from me. ... I am fully resolved to convert, but better at your hands than at those of another. When Naomi heard this she began to set in order before her the laws of conversion.' (Ruth Rabbah 2:22)

In the immediately following verses Ruth expresses her determination to follow Naomi, and her loyalty and commitment to her mother-in-law. For the Biblical author it is enough that Ruth says 'Your people shall be my people, your God my God' to represent her joining herself to the fate of Israel. Indeed the sequence, putting 'people' first, and only then followed by 'God', exactly represents the process we mentioned above. First comes the joining with the national community, naturalisation, and only then, as an automatic consequence, the religious commitment.

At its face value, Ruth's words are simply an expression of personal loyalty to and love for her mother-in-law, and her willingness to follow her to her own land. Yet there are at least three different early rabbinic interpretation of this passage that follow the same pattern: in the Targum, the Aramaic translation of the Book; in Ruth Rabbah, the major Midrashic commentary on it; and in the Talmud itself, Yebamot 47b. All are similarly constructed, as if Ruth's words were one half of a conversation with Naomi, with the rabbis supplying Naomi's missing words. Having established that this was part of the process of conversion, with Ruth eager to be taught certain basic principles, they took their cue from Ruth's 'answers' and derived from them the laws that Naomi taught her.

The first commandment that Naomi provides tells Ruth that it is forbidden to walk more than two thousand cubits on the Shabbat (Targum, Yebamot). Which obviously feeds into Ruth's 'reply': 'where you walk I will walk'. Presumably Naomi must have taught her some fundamental rules about the Shabbat. Ruth Rabbah has an interesting variant, for Naomi tells Ruth instead that it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to go to the circuses and theatres of the gentiles. This is more in keeping with the view of Ruth as a Moabite girl with a rich social life behind her.

Ruth's next reply is also to two different suggestions as to which laws Naomi taught her. One is again a more domestic one: it is not the custom of Israel to live in a house where there is no *mezuzah* on the door (Ruth Rabbah). Hence Ruth's answer: where you dwell, literally 'stay overnight', there I will dwell. However the other version hints at a sexual issue that is also very present within the Book: it is not the custom for a female to be alone with a man who is not her husband! (Rashi's version of Yebamot). There is a certain irony here in the choice of law because Boaz will use the same verb '*loon*', 'to stay overnight', when he asks Ruth to remain with him on the threshing floor till the morning.

The next teaching by Naomi is common to all these rabbinic texts: 'The Jewish people are distinguished by keeping 613 mitzvot, commandments.' Hence Ruth's reply accepting the 'yoke of the mitzvot', 'Your people shall be my people'.

Again there is a variation in the response to her next answer, 'Your God, my God'. The Ruth Rabbah version has not specified the 613 mitzvot so now has Naomi teaching her 'the rest of the mitzvot'. But the other two versions, perhaps more appropriately for the context, have Naomi teach her that, as an Israelite, it is forbidden to worship other gods.

Ruth's final words are a very powerful evocation of a lifetime commitment to Naomi and her people: 'Where you die I shall die, and there I shall be buried'. But this statement is taken almost

literally by all three sources which describe the different kinds of death penalties that can be imposed by a Beth Din: stoning, burning, decapitation and strangling, depending on the nature of the capital crime committed. Since Ruth talks about burial, they conclude by defining the two different kinds of graves that are available depending on the nature of the death described above!

According to these versions Naomi is enough of an expert in Jewish law to be able to impart this information to Ruth. But in addition to the above laws, she must have given Ruth further instruction on the walk from Moab to Bethlehem about how to glean properly. This emerges in a rabbinic observation about Boaz. The Biblical text has him enquire about Ruth when he first sees her: 'To whom does this young lady belong?' Clearly, for the rabbis, a man of Boaz's piety could not have simply been attracted by a pretty face! Though a rabbinic text also notes that on the day Ruth arrived in Bethlehem Boaz's wife died. Besides which Boaz already knew something about her story as he will later reveal to her. The mediaeval commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra thought she might have been wearing Moabite national dress, or possibly had some kind of facial appearance that would have marked her out as different. However he also notes that there is a well-known Midrash, and indeed Rashi quotes a version of this Midrash but introduces it with the question, was it Boaz's way to ask about women, surely not! Instead Boaz observed the modesty and wisdom of her actions. Ruth Rabbah elaborates on the former:

The other women bent over when they gleaned, but she sat and gleaned... The other women flirted with the harvesters but she kept to herself. The other women gleaned amongst the sheaves, but she only gleaned amongst the parts that had been declared ownerless. (Ruth Rabbah 4:9)

Rashi then adds that she picked up two stalks when they were together but not three, as this number would not constitute gleanings but a sheaf and would not be permitted.

But Boaz's own legal knowledge becomes apparent in another matter that is central to the problem of Ruth. She is repeatedly described as a Moabite. Indeed the rabbis assumed that she came from royal lineage and was no less than the granddaughter of Eglon king of Moab. Not only that, but he in turn was the grandson of Balak, the earlier king, who had incited Balaam the prophet to curse Israel, only to find that God forced him to bless Israel. This is also a favourite idea of the rabbis that former enemies ended up, generations later, becoming part of the Jewish people. But how could the sons of Elimelech possibly marry Moabite women when such a marriage was explicitly forbidden in Deuteronomy.

An Ammonite and Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Eternal even unto the tenth generation. (Deut 23:4)

Presumably behind this law are a number of associations with these two peoples, beginning with the scandalous story of the birth of their two ancestors as the incestuous offspring of Lot and his daughters. The behaviour of these two peoples in the wilderness stories, seducing the Israelites and leading them into idolatry or fighting them, would have added to, or confirmed, the need for such a prohibition. Yet Ruth was somehow acceptable, and moreover the ancestress of King David himself, so this required an explanation and justification.

The rabbis saw this problem acted out in chapter four of the Book in the story of the anonymous redeemer who had a prior commitment to buy back the field of Naomi. While he was willing at first he turned the opportunity down at the last minute. The reason for that is not made explicit in the Biblical text, but the rabbis assumed he thought that he would be breaking the law of Deuteronomy, as he understood it, by marrying Ruth the Moabite. However Boaz was a serious student of halachah and kept up to date with new decisions, so he knew that the law had recently

been re-interpreted to make such a marriage possible. The text in Deuteronomy uses masculine terminology, which in Biblical terms includes the feminine, when speaking of an Ammonite and a Moabite. But law is developed or challenged through examining the precise formulation of legal enactments in new circumstances. The terminology of the commandment was explicitly masculine so it need not apply to a Moabite woman, and hence his marriage to Ruth was now permitted. While this is told at the expense of the anonymous redeemer, and to Boaz's credit, it also helps the rabbis solve an embarrassing contradiction between the Book of Ruth and Deuteronomy.

Just to return one final time to the issue of conversion, if Ruth's words to Naomi constituted her entry into the Jewish community, what was the status of her and Orpah's previous marriage to Machlon and Chilion? If neither of them had converted beforehand these marriages would have been a breach of the covenant law. Indeed this could have been a possible cause of their early deaths! But again it is Abraham Ibn Ezra who goes against the generally accepted rabbinic interpretation of events. In his view the two daughters-in-law had indeed converted prior to their marriages. What is his proof for this? When Ruth persists in staying with her mother-in-law Naomi tries to send her away, she says explicitly, 'your sister-in-law has returned to her people and to her god' (Ruth 1:15). This can only mean, he argues, that they had already converted and adopted the country and god of their husbands. So how does he explain Ruth's confession to Naomi, 'Your people shall be my people, your God, my God'? He explains her twofold saying as meaning: I shall never depart from the Torah of Israel or from the declaration of the unity of God.

All these concerns with the legal ramifications should not ignore that the rabbis in their commentaries also recognized other elements in the story. In particular they responded to the sexual undercurrent. When Naomi says that even if she were to be with a man that night and became pregnant and bore a child, would her daughters-in-law wait till they had grown up and marry them? Though they were aware that this was only an exaggerated question raised by Naomi, they also discussed whether the law of levirate marriage might have to be invoked. When a man died without offspring, his widow had to marry his brother in order to raise up children in the name of the deceased and ensure that his relationship to the family property was maintained. But this only applied, they pointed out, to brothers alive at the time of the first death. However they focused in particular on Naomi's reference to doing something that night, and assumed that she was yet again imparting things of significance to Ruth.

Said Rabbi Yochanan: Torah teaches you appropriate behaviour. Namely that intercourse should not take place by day but rather by night. That is the meaning of what is written in the Book of Esther (Esther 2:14), [referring to the beauty queens brought to King Ahasuerus to be tested out by him] 'In the evening they would come and in the morning they would return.' Hence the phrase, 'if I was with a man tonight'. (Ruth Rabbah 2:16)

One rabbi's view of the beauty of Ruth is also brought out in a somewhat shocking statement which shows that the rabbis were not averse to the occasional lapse into locker-room humour. The verse says '*vayiker mikreha*', 'she happened to chance upon the field of Boaz (2:3). From the verbal root '*kara*', 'to happen', comes the word '*keri*' which means 'mishap', but it is used euphemistically for a particular mishap common to adolescent males.

Rabbi Yochanan said: [She was so beautiful that] everyone who saw her had a seminal emission!' (Ruth Rabbah 4:4)

But what happened when Ruth came secretly at night to Boaz on the threshing floor? The rabbis are at pains to point out that nothing happened and that both behaved appropriately, but that did not stop them recognizing the temptation faced by Boaz. They had already taught that on the day

that Ruth arrived, Boaz's wife died. On the threshing floor Boaz makes an oath that they felt needed further explanation. 'If the first redeemer does not redeem you then I will redeem you myself. As the Eternal lives, lie here tonight!' The apparent lack of relationship between the oath in the name of God and the command to stay the night led them to the following view.

His evil inclination kept inciting him all night long, saying: You are free and are looking for a wife, and she is free and is looking for a husband. Come to her and she can become your wife. He swore to his inclination: 'As the Eternal lives, I shall not touch her!' and to the woman he said: 'lie here tonight till morning.' (Ruth Rabbah 6:1)

There is one further theme that was of concern to the rabbis, which once again reverts back to Ruth's status as a Moabitess. How could the ancestress of King David, and indeed of the longed for Messiah, have come from such a background? The problem is compounded, as explicitly noted in the Book of Ruth itself, by the equally scandalous background of Boaz as a descendant of the illicit relationship between Judah and Tamar. Indeed the story of both women, Ruth and Tamar, outsiders who take action to ensure the continuity of the family line, invites comparison. A number of Midrashim reflect on David's struggle to be accepted as king because of this background, especially Ruth's Moabite status. Finally, however, because God elevated him to kingship, this past was now overcome. This is illustrated in a rabbinic reading of Psalm 116:16, 'You have loosed my bands'.

David said to God: You have loosed the bands that constrict me on account of Tamar, of whom it is written, 'You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law' (Lev 18:15). You have also loosed the bands that constrict me on account of Ruth the Moabitess. (Midrash Psalms 116:9)

In my own reading of the Book of Ruth, the author is similarly concerned with correcting both of these previous incestuous events: Lot and his daughters and Judah and Tamar. The past cannot be removed, but it can be repaired when the descendants of those events re-enact them, but behave this time in an exemplary fashion. Hence the encounter on the threshing floor where nothing untoward actually happens; only after marriage is it explicitly stated that intercourse took place leading to an immediate pregnancy. Thus the family tree at the end of the Book leading to David, expresses a longing for a future messianic redemption.

This reading of the Book finds its echo in certain rabbinic teachings that became even more developed in the mystical tradition. Commenting on a phrase in Job, 'Who can withdraw purity from impurity, not one? (Job 14:3): a Midrash explains:

Abraham came from Terah, Hezekiah from Ahaz, Josiah from Amon, Mordechai from Shimei, Israel from idolaters, the world to come from this world. Who could do this? Who could command this? Who could decree this? No one [but God] the unique One of the world! (Bamidbar Rabbah 19:1)

This view of purity emerging from impurity is later developed in Lurianic Kabbalah. Within the corruption of the world are holy sparks of an original divine light, and our task is to redeem and restore them, a process called 'Tikun', 'repair'. Thus David and the messiah emerge from this earlier corruption that has been healed by Ruth. This doctrine became itself distorted when messianic claimants felt the need to immerse themselves in corruption in order to do such a repair, alas unsuccessfully.

But if we remain within normative rabbinic tradition, the rabbis are aware that behind the simply human stories within Scripture, there is a deeper drama being enacted. Whatever the surface

events may be, behind them are the hidden actions of God. The protagonists of the Book of Ruth do their best to fulfil their responsibilities to one another and to their tradition. Though the rabbis will give each of them prophetic insight into the future, the author does not. Their humanity suffices. But for the Midrash even the most mundane of domestic events may play a part in the ultimate redemption of the whole world:

The tribal ancestors were engaged in selling Joseph.
Joseph was occupied with his sackcloth and ashes.
Reuben was occupied with his sackcloth and ashes.
Jacob was occupied with his sackcloth and ashes.
Judah was occupied in taking a wife.
The Holy One, blessed be He, was engaged in creating the light of the Messiah.
(Genesis Rabbah 85:1)