

# THE MANTLE OF THE MATRIARCHS: RUTH 4:11-15

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Intra-biblical interpretation may be loosely defined as the process by which biblical texts cite and/or allude to earlier biblical texts. This mode of analysis has joined source criticism, form criticism, rhetorical criticism and, most closely, canonical criticism as a means of better understanding Scripture.

Although the traditional sources were well aware of this phenomenon, American Reform Rabbi Samuel Sandmel, the first Jewish president of the Society of Biblical Literature, may have been the first modern scholar to identify this feature of Scripture in an article, "The Haggadah within Scripture."<sup>1</sup> This piece may be seen as part of Sandmel's long campaign to introduce a Jewish perspective into critical Bible scholarship. Since the publication of Michael Fishbane's *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*,<sup>2</sup> which adduced hundreds of examples of intra-biblical interpretation in legal, narrative, and prophetic texts, this phenomenon has been well-documented and widely applied. Like canonical criticism, intra-biblical exegesis has the great merit of reflecting the sacred nature of biblical texts. Whether or not one believes in Mosaic revelation, it is demonstrable that, in the ancient world, texts attributed to Moses were considered Divinely authored and texts considered Divinely authored were attributed to Moses, in the apt formulation of Brevard Childs.<sup>3</sup>

This mode of analysis has yet another virtue more germane to my discussion of Ruth 4:11-15. Namely, intra-biblical interpretation acknowledges that "originality" in the ancient world differs from our modern conceptions. Anyone with a background in classics knows that ancient texts freely cite, allude to, summarize, and even repeat verbatim other works, sometimes at considerable length. There is no "anxiety of influence" at work in antiquity: Harold Bloom notwithstanding, ancient authors were reassured, not unsettled, by placing their texts in the service of tradition. With this in mind, let us look at a mere five verses of Ruth, in particular the way the title character's function is drawn out by allusions to Matriarchs past. Here is the relevant passage in its entirety:

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*All the people at the gate and the elders answered, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel! Prosper in Ephratah and perpetuate your name in Bethlehem! And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah – through the offspring which the Lord will give you by this young woman."*

*So Boaz married Ruth, she became his wife and he cohabited with her. The Lord let her conceive and she bore a son. And the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today! May his name be perpetuated in Israel! He will renew your life and sustain your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law who loves you and is better to you than seven sons"* (Ruth 4:11-15).

Many commentators noted the peculiarity of the phrase, *May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel!* (Ruth 4:11). After all, was not Leah the elder sister, the first wife of Jacob, and procreatively speaking, the main builder of the house of Israel? Indeed, I found that one Jewish Bible text (HUC Megillot, Ruth 4:11) flipped the English of the translation to "Leah and Rachel." But since the very next line in the passage cited above refers to Ephratah/Bethlehem, Rachel's burial place (Gen. 35:19), it is difficult to see this word order as accidental. Following the prophet Jeremiah, who raised Rachel into a symbol of exile and redemption, the author of Ruth also seems to have raised Rachel to Leah's co-equal as progenitrix of the nation. Commenting on this peculiarity, Midrash Ruth Rabbah 7:13 notes:

R. Berekhiah said: The majority of those sitting were descendants of Leah, so he mentions Rachel first. R. Abba bar Kahana said: Rachel was the chief wife of Jacob, as it says *But Rachel was barren* [Read not *akarrah* but *ikkarah*] (Gen. 29:31). Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai taught: Since they spoke against Rachel, therefore all Jacob's descendants are ascribed to her, as it is written, '*Rachel weeping for her children*' (Jer. 31:15).

What else is intriguing here is the invocation of the Matriarchs' names in a blessing, a biblical example of what would later be called *zekhut imma-hot* [merit

of the mothers] (though, of course, far more often in Jewish sources: *zekhut avot*). I agree with Ilana Pardes's suggestion that the key to this verse is a replacement of the standard model of female (sororal) competition with one of collaboration. Rachel and Leah occasionally worked together – witness their eagerness to leave their father's house and return to Jacob's homeland (Gen. 31:14-16).<sup>4</sup> But as a rule, they competed both for children and for Jacob's affection.

Ruth and Naomi, in contrast, will collaborate throughout this scroll to achieve a result beneficial to all. Even with respect to Boaz, their actions constitute collaboration, not competition. The earlier competition of Rachel and Leah has thus been smoothed over by the current and future collaboration of Ruth and Naomi; this, surely, is deliberate narration.

Ruth also recalls Rachel's infertility. Although Ruth is not denoted as a woman-who-has-not-given-birth [*akarah*], we are told explicitly that Ruth and Orpah had stayed in Moab for ten years (Ruth 1:4) and did not have children. Indeed, in the midrash on this verse there is lots of word-play on *akarah* [barren] and *ikkarah* [principal]. Ruth, like Rachel, was the focal point of the household. The NJPS renders *bayit* in Ruth 4:11 both as generic "house" and also as "House," connoting something like household.

Certainly *bayit* can have both meanings, but the NJPS rendering of them differently in this sentence seems to me to lessen the equivalence of what Rachel was and what Ruth will be: Both ordinary women with ordinary *tsuris* and also Matriarchs. All in all, Ruth serves to unite the building project of the two Matriarchs; she embodies their spirit; she is their culmination.<sup>5</sup>

Verse 12, *And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah*, is obvious in its application of past to present. After all, like Ruth, Tamar began life as a non-Israelite, and a despised one at that; the former a Moabite, the latter a Canaanite. Both had an unfruitful prior marriage before the unions with Judah and Boaz. Both, against all social expectations and

against real resistance, join their fates to that of the people Israel. Both take on the role of sexual initiator. Whether or not Ruth and Boaz consummated a sexual relationship on the threshing floor in Chapter 3, she clearly initiated the action, going beyond the instructions given her by Naomi.

In this regard, Tamar's actions in Genesis 38 are deceptive, not straightforward, but the narrator applauds her goal, and Judah affirms her rectitude, not wholly unlike Boaz. Finally, and I admit this is rather obvious, both stories provide a crucial link in the genealogical chain that leads to David. All these connections would have been patent to ancient auditors of the text, who surely heard in these verses the echoes identified here.

The next verse, *The Lord let her conceive and she bore a son*, also contains a peculiarity, since the phrasing in Hebrew *va-yitten lah Adonai herayon* is unique. What does it mean? At the very least, it seems that God intervened to allow Ruth to conceive; at the very most, following the midrash, *va-yitten lah Adonai herayon* means that God fashioned Ruth's womb. The idea of fashioning a womb so that a Matriarch could bear a child makes the most sense in Sarah's case. The other Matriarchs who are termed *akarah* (Rebekah and Rachel) are in their child-bearing prime; only the post-menopausal Sarah (Gen. 18:11) would need Divine intervention. Perhaps this goes too far. At the very least, God visits Ruth in a way reminiscent of *The Lord took note of Sarah* (Gen. 21:1).

The praise of Ruth's fidelity to Naomi reaches its climax in the verdict on *your daughter-in-law who loves you and is better to you than seven sons* (Ruth 4:15). Strong words indeed for Naomi, who we are told by the narrator returns to Bethlehem *without her two sons and without a husband* (1:5), and who tells the townswomen of Bethlehem the same thing in even more dramatic terms (1:20-21). The attentive reader will think of another biblical character consoled by a comparison with sons: Hannah, who is told by Elkanah that she is better to him than ten sons (1 Sam. 1:8) and then proclaims, *While the barren woman bears seven, the mother of many is forlorn* (2:5). Once again, the connection does not seem far-fetched. Hannah also experienced infertility, and also underwent considerable suffering before God intervened and gave her a wonderful child.

In these verses, then, we have Ruth likened, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, to Matriarchs of the nation. But one is missing, arguably the greatest. Where is the allusion to Rebekah? Ruth has an untroubled pregnancy, without any internecine struggle or Divine oracle (Gen. 25:22-23). Unlike Rebekah and Tamar who both bear twin sons, Ruth gives birth to a single son, Obed. True, like Rebekah (Gen. 24) she travels from a far away land to find her husband, but so do other women. I cannot, in truth, find any direct biblical link. But I can attest that the rabbis were also puzzled by this absence and had this to say: *And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah – through the offspring which the Lord will give you by this young woman* (Ruth 4:12). They said: May all the children which the Holy One, blessed be He, will give you be from this righteous woman. Similarly, *And Isaac entreated the Lord for his wife because she was barren* (Gen. 23:21). What is the meaning? It teaches that Isaac prostrated himself in one corner, and Rebekah in the other, and he said, "Lord of the Universe, may all the children which Thou are destined to grant be of this righteous woman" (Midrash Ruth Rabbah 7:14).

Even though "this young woman" is a recurring phrase in Ruth, I think the midrash is stretching here to liken Ruth and Rebekah. But I take their stretch as agreement regarding what I see as an important motive of these verses: elevating Ruth through association.<sup>6</sup>

Three conclusions emerge from this brief investigation: First, the Sages, ancient and modern, were keenly aware of the interplay among these biblical verses, and, more broadly, the kinship between intra-biblical interpretation and midrash. While it would be unpardonably ethnocentric to suggest that only Jews could have discovered intra-biblical interpretation, it is not surprising. (Sigmund Freud was supposed to have quipped that while it was true that a Jew founded psychoanalysis, it was also true that many Jews did not.)

Second, the claim of Phyllis Tribble that the feminist element in the story disappears in this chapter cannot stand.<sup>7</sup> Tribble, one of the greatest contemporary readers of biblical texts, and one, moreover, sympathetic to Jewish perspectives, has simply missed the boat on this one. There is more justice to her argument that Ruth's character is swallowed up by Naomi's, as the latter dominates verses 16 and 17, and the townswomen of Bethlehem declare '*A son is born to Naomi . . .*' and *She became its foster mother* [omenet] (4:17,

4:16). But even here, I think that the collaboration theme, as with Leah and Rachel, trumps the displacement theme. Some will also recall Miriam's arranging for Jocheved to be nursemaid [*omenet*] to Moses, another case of two women in a mother-daughter relationship collaborating to save a savior of Israel, Obed/David in Ruth and Moses in Exodus. (I admit that this case of intra-biblical interpretation has less support than my main example.)

Although Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* usually gets the laurels for being the first feminist classic, I would award it to Ruth, following Pardes rather than Tribe, and certainly not despite Chapter 4.

Thirdly, intra-biblical interpretation works effectively to deepen a particular character, in this case by associating her with other characters from the biblical past. Intra-biblical interpretation serves as an extension of Auerbach's celebrated depiction of biblical characters as "fraught with background."<sup>8</sup> Auerbach meant that each biblical character develops over the course of the story – but this is especially true of major characters, which tend to be male. Female characters can also have depth, and intra-biblical interpretation is one way that depth is provided. Whether Ruth was composed in the period of the Judges or later, there is no doubt that the Matriarchs of Israel had already achieved canonical status as models of character. No mode of praise more fitting or biblical could be imagined than associating the Moabite girl with the Matriarchs.

#### NOTES

All Midrash translations are from *The Midrash, v. 8, Ruth and Ecclesiastes* (London: Soncino Press, 1939).

1. Samuel Sandmel, "The Haggadah within Scripture," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 1961; 80(2) pp. 105-122.

2. Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

3. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979). On canonical criticism and intra-biblical exegesis as a development of same, see Gerald T. Sheppard, "Canonical Criticism," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, (New York: Doubleday, 1992) pp. 861-866. The present diversity in canonical approaches has led to a variety of proposals regarding the future of biblical interpretation. Sanders' and Fishbane's concern with intra-biblical interpretation suggests continuity between pre-biblical interpretation of normative traditions and later post-biblical interpretations of scripture in Judaism and Christianity."

4. Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible. A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 115. Pardes draws out another similarity between Rachel and Ruth: "The Book of Ruth begins where the story of Rachel ends: on the way to Bethlehem."

5. I do not like the usual renderings "barren" or "infertile" for *akarah*, since every woman named *akarah* in Tanakh gives birth, and inevitably, to a special child. *Akarah* is a designation of annunciation and God's ultimate redemption. Isaiah 54:1 summarizes this understanding: *Shout, O barren*

*one, /You who bore no child! /Shout aloud for joy, /You who did not travail! /For the children of the wife forlorn /Shall outnumber those of the espoused.*

See, by contrast, the case of Michal, not called an *akarah*, who had no child until the day of her death (2 Sam. 6:23).

6. Rabbi Ya'akov Yavetz, author of *Tzur Ya'akov* (1886) points out the affinity of Ruth to Rachel and Leah. They all sought to build the house of Jacob, they did not bring anything with them on their return to Canaan, they were from parents of questionable morals, and they came under Divine guidance [*hashgahah*]. Cited in Menahem Kasher, *Torah Sheleimah* (New York: American Biblical Encyclopedic Society, 1999) on Ruth 4, note 38.

7. Phyllis Trible, "A Human Comedy," in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

8. Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus's Scar," in *Mimesis* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1953).



**עשה תורתך קבע**

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October	Psalms Proverbs	136 – 150 1 – 15
November	Proverbs Job	16 – 31 1 – 13
December	Job	14 – 42
January	Song of Songs Ruth Lamentations Ecclesiastes	1 – 8 1 – 4 1 – 5 1 – 12
February	Esther Daniel Ezra	1 – 10 1 – 12 1 – 6

