

THE USE OF SYMBOLISM AND HIDDEN MESSAGES IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

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In this paper, I will demonstrate that the author of the Book of Ruth used various types of symbolic words and hidden messages that enrich the text with a double meaning, revealed and concealed. Therefore, by way of introduction, I would like to dwell on the meaning of the term "symbol."

N. Friedman, in an essay on the meaning of symbols, defines a symbol as a word or phrase with a double meaning:

"They [symbols] may derive from literal or figurative language in which what is shown . . . means, by virtue of some semblance, suggestion or association, something more or something else."¹ To clarify this he adds: "Symbolism resembles figures of speech in having a basic doubleness in meaning between what is meant and what is said . . . but it differs in that what is said is also what is meant."²

M. Hallamish, in discussing the place of symbols in Jewish mysticism, writes:

The Mystic looks for a way to use a [common] word but with a different meaning from the norm. More precisely, it will be of an additional meaning imbedded within it in some fashion, through which those who use the word can hint to certain truths or metaphysical knowledge.³

The symbol offers the possibility of transforming the word into something greater, imbuing it with a variety of meanings. For itself, the word is limiting and narrow, but new possibilities are opened. As Y. Tishbi put it, to the Jewish mystical mind the greatest collection of mystical symbols is the Bible itself.⁴

The Book of Ruth, while part of the *Ketuvim* [Hagiographa] where no revelation is being described, is one of the best examples of the symbolic style of writing. If we add to this the association of the prophet Samuel with the book,⁵ it should not be surprising to find the same symbolic literary style found in the prophets.

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NAMES OF PEOPLE

Individual names are the most obvious use of symbols in the book.⁶ Elimelech [למלך־אֵלִי] means "may kingship come my way" or "God is my king." Both are possible understandings, since Elimelech was of the tribe of Judah, the tribe of monarchy. The sages say that Elimelech was a man of means, and therefore the term *ish* [lit. "a man"] is used, which usually denotes a man of stature.⁷ The name Naomi comes from נְאוֹמִי [pleasant]. She is the heroine of the story together with her daughter-in-law Ruth.⁸

The most blatant symbolic names are those of Elimelech's sons Machlon [sickness] and Chilyon [decimation]. Who calls their children by such names? Even if we translate these names as "forgiveness" and "expectation," the second name seems forced and the first should be "Mechilon." Were these their real names or did the author change their names to make a literary value statement turning their names into symbols? The latter opinion is congruent with the talmudic opinion.⁹ This can be confirmed from the Book of Chronicles.

In describing the family of Judah, the Book of Chronicles refers to *Yokim and Cozeba and Yoash and Saraph who married Moabites and returned to Bethlehem* (I Chr. 4:22). Were Yoash and Saraph the real names for Machlon and Chilyon? If so, were the names changed for symbolic reasons?¹⁰

Ruth and Orpah are the next names to investigate. Ruth embraced the commandments and Orpah turned away from them. "Orpah" is derived from *oref* [the back of the head], and פָּנָה עֹרֵף is "to turn away." She turned away from Naomi and the Israelite people and went back to Moab.

Ruth embraced the commandments. The Talmud in Bava Batra says that her name hints to this deed. The Hebrew letters of רֹוּת [Ruth] come numerically to 606. If you add to this sum the seven laws of the Sons of Noah which are incumbent on all the nations, you reach the number 613, corresponding to the commandments.

NAMES OF PLACES

Elimelech's family left Bethlehem because of a famine (Ruth 1:1). They went to the fields of Moab (1:2). One cannot but sense the irony in this passage. They leave Bethlehem (lit. "house of bread") during a famine, hinting to

the reader that they made a tragic mistake. They actually left the house of bread¹¹ in the middle of a famine to go to the fields of Moab. A **house** denotes a warm environment, as opposed to a **field**, that lies open and unprotected. In biblical writings, the empty field is an image that often precedes tragedy.¹²

The name Moab is also not accidental: this is the nation that represents the antithesis of hospitality. The Talmud tells us that Elimelech left Bethlehem in order that beggars not come to his door during the famine.¹³ This mind-set connected him with Moab, the nation that refused to offer bread and water to the Israelites coming up from the Sinai (Deut. 23:5). Moab is also a nation begotten through the kind of act that the Bible ironically calls "kindness" of a misguided nature (Lev. 20:17). This was Lot's daughter thinking that no other man was alive and so bearing a child by her father (Gen. 19:37). These were the people with whom Elimelech connected.

THE ABSENCE OF NAMES

Sometimes the book omits names on purpose. Leaving out the name of a person or place is a way of ridding them of identity, and thereby of importance. The first five verses describe the fall of Elimelech's family from high stature to unfortunate strangers in a foreign land. The minute Naomi, Ruth and Orpah decide to return to Bethlehem everything starts to look up: *And they **got up** [קמו] she and her daughters-in-law and left the fields of Moab* (1:4). One can feel the depiction of ascent. As they head towards Bethlehem, Moab becomes a nameless memory: *And they left **that place** where they had been* (1:7). This is the first time Moab is not referred to by name. The intentional absence of a name creates a feeling of the insignificance of the place. After Orpah turns her back on her mother-in-law, Naomi speaks of her to Ruth as *Your sister-in-law [אחות]* instead of using her name (1:15).¹⁴ The absence of names can be found elsewhere in biblical literature. The Book of Exodus, whose real Hebrew title is Book of Names [ספר שמות], plays with this theme in the first two chapters. Chapter 1 tells us in detail the names of Jacob's household on their way to Egypt, but in Egypt the slavery leaves them nameless, without identity. A new king (without name) forgets Joseph (Ex. 1:8) and speaks to his people (1:9) without mentioning the name Egypt. Chapter 2 brings more nameless people. Moses' parents and his sister do not

yet have names (2:1). Neither does Pharaoh's daughter (2:5). Only after Moses is rescued by Pharaoh's daughter is he called by name (Ex. 2:10).

TERMS FOUND IN OTHER BIBLICAL PASSAGES

Sometimes specific terms are used in different places and come to denote similar ideas, making the comparison between them valuable. The term קָמוּ [*and they got up*] is used here for leaving the fields of Moab. In Genesis 23:17-18, Ephron's field and the cave therein figuratively *get up*, as if they were to be acquired by Abraham.¹⁵ The concept of a field being uplifted or ascending is significant since, as mentioned before, an empty field often denotes a prelude to tragedy in biblical literature. A more significant term used in the Book of Ruth is the root קָדַח [*pakod*] (1:6), which denotes a redemptive act of Divine remembrance.¹⁶

There are significant similarities between the Book of Samuel and the Book of Ruth. Though these similarities may need more in-depth research, here I shall limit myself to compare terms found in the Book of Ruth with those found in the Book of Samuel, both works being ascribed to the prophet Samuel.¹⁷ The most obvious example of such an expression is $\text{לְפָנֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל}$ [*v'zoth lifanim b'yisrael*], found in only two places in the Bible: *This was [the custom] once in Israel, for redemption and bartering, to make a purchase, one removed his shoe and gave it to their fellow* (Ruth 4:7), and *There was a time in Israel . . .* (I Sam. 9:9).

Another expression peculiar to both books is Ruth's oath *This is what God should do to me and more* [if I break the oath]' (Ruth 1:17). This, too, is found in Samuel: *'Thus should God do to Jonathan and more'* (I Sam. 20:13; see also 25:22). In addition, there are terms that take on more meaning when compared to the Book of Samuel. For instance, when Boaz sees Ruth for the first time he asks: *'To whom does this girl [belong]* [$\text{לְמִי הַנַּעֲרָה הַזֹּאת}$]?' (Ruth 2:5). This parallels a similar question about Ruth's descendant David. After David smote Goliath, Saul asks: *'From whom is this lad* [בן נַי זֶה]?' and *'From whom is this boy* [$\text{בן נַי זֶה הַנֶּעַר}$]?' (I Sam. 17:56,57). This questioning about family ties is similar in both cases.¹⁸ The strength of the comparison is in a few aspects: the similar wording, the family relationship between Ruth and David, and the presence of a hidden implication. After all, Saul knew who David was. He had already offered David his sword to fight Goliath. The question is an attempt to understand how this individual is

unique and managed to accomplish such a feat. In Boaz's question concerning Ruth, he, too, looks at the family ties to discover if possibly it is not by chance that this girl found her way into his field and created such a commotion. Then he discovers that she is family.

MYSTICAL SYMBOLS

Up to now, this article has discussed metaphors and symbols from the point of view of understanding the message conveyed in the text [טוּפֵי]. Even so, I would like to mention an unusual form of symbolism discussed in the Zoharic literature.

The *Tikunei Zohar* interprets the Book of Ruth as containing hidden, messianic implications. Here we are dealing more with an allegorical mystical interpretation than symbolic ones. As in other literature related to the *Zohar*, the author looks for the seemingly ambiguous terms to base his claim. The phrase which almost begs this *double entendre* is the phrase *upon redemption and upon bartering* [עַל הַגְּאֻלָּה וְעַל הַתְּמוּרָה] (4:7), which ostensibly refers to a custom concerning acquisitions. However, one can translate the phrase as "redemption and its impersonator." *Tikunei Zohar* points to a rather awkward part of the story of Ruth and re-interprets it. In 3:15, after Boaz is shocked to see a woman lying at the bottom of his grain stack on the threshing floor, he realizes that Ruth wants a levirate marriage with him [גְּאֻלָּה], as he is the nearest of kin.

He tells her to wait until morning. He then proceeds to give her "six barley," which literally might mean six strands of barley, to take with her. The commentators explain this to mean six measures of barley, but the wording is unusual. The Talmud sees the six barleys as a hint to six important descendants of Ruth: David, the Messiah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.¹⁹ But the *Tikunei Zohar* sees the six units of grain as a hint of 6,000 years of history.²⁰

Boaz tells Ruth that even though their marriage will bring the redemption (a play on the word for a levirate marriage), it cannot happen until morning; that is, the morning of the Sixth Millennium, which is its last 500 years. Then, the messianic king, a descendant of Ruth, will appear. Even though this type of midrashic homily seems to be based on excerpts taken out of context, the argument presented is that the whole Book of Ruth is actually a metaphor

with a hidden messianic agenda. This is similar to the rabbinic understanding of the Song of Songs as a metaphor for God's love for Israel.²¹

HIDDEN MESSAGES

The Book of Ruth is filled with irony, *double entendres*, drama and even humor. I will give just a few examples from Chapters 1 and 2. In Chapter 1, there is a hidden discussion between Naomi and her daughters-in-law. She wants them to come with her. After all, they are all the family she has left, but she knows that Bethlehemite society is not accepting of strangers, especially Moabite women (as is obvious from Chapter 4:6). She is not able to say this directly, so she hints of it in an ironic statement: *'Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. For even if there were hope [for marriage] and [I were to conceive] tonight and bear children, would you wait for them to grow up?'* (1:12-13). Why would her daughters-in-law expect her to produce husbands for them? Obviously, Naomi knows how difficult it will be for them to remarry in Bethlehem. Orpah gets the message and returns home. Ruth clings to Naomi.

Chapter 2 includes a humorous description of Ruth's being unaccustomed to Judean culture: *And she went and gleaned in the field after the reapers* (2:3). In Hebrew, the word "reapers" is masculine gender.²² It appears that Ruth, unacquainted with Judean customs of modesty, went gleaning in the field behind the male reapers. It also appears that out of courtesy, no one said anything to her. Boaz came from the city and noticing this unusual event asked right away: *'To whom is this girl?'* (2:6). The reaper, possibly embarrassed to have allowed such a situation, covered up for himself with the excuse *'She is a Moabite girl who came with Naomi from the fields of Moab,'* meaning, "She is a foreigner, so obviously she does not know how to act." Boaz tries to hint to Ruth to glean with the woman reapers. *And Boaz said to Ruth: 'You have heard my daughter, do not go to glean in another field, do not change places and thus shall you cling to my [reaper] girls'* (2:8). Boaz diplomatically told her to glean in his field but only among the woman reapers. Ruth did not get the message, and thought he was just being kind in inviting her to stay in the field. In the meantime, Boaz told his male reapers to keep their distance from her (2:9), and also not to embarrass her if she does glean among them (2:15).

When Ruth returns home, beaming that Boaz came over to talk to her, she still does not comprehend what he had told her. After telling Naomi about her meeting with Boaz, she says: *'He even told me to cling with his [reaper] boys until the end of the harvest'* (2:21). Naomi, familiar with the customs of Judah, understands Ruth's mistake right away, and tells her: *'Better my daughter that you go out with his girls so that they should not harm you in another field'* (2:22). That is when Ruth realizes what Naomi means: *And she clung to Boaz' girls to glean until the end of the barley and wheat harvest* (2:23).

In conclusion, biblical literature like the Book of Ruth is, of course, a story. How one reads the story and how one looks for the subtleties that differentiate between symbolic writings and other forms of biblical literature is of extreme importance in understanding the message the author is trying to convey. This article is but a beginning. More research is needed on the Book of Ruth and also on biblical literature in general to find out how these types of symbols permeate the text and enhance its meaning.

NOTES

1. Norman Friedman, "Symbol," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. A. Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) p. 1252.
2. p. 1253.
3. M. Hallamish, *Mavo La-Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1991) p. 21 (my translation).
4. Y. Tishbi, *Mishnat Hazohar*, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1982) p. 144. The Ramban in the introduction to his commentary on the Torah writes that he has a tradition that the whole Torah is made up of various combinations of Divine names.
5. See Bava Batra 14b. See also Note 15.
6. Y. Zakovitz sees all the names as in the book as symbolic aside from Naomi and Boaz. See his article in *Encyclopedea Mikrait*, Vol. 7, pp. 337-338. M. Weinfeld agrees that the names seem to be symbolic, p. 341. S. Yeiven also argues that the names Machlon and Chilyon are symbolic *Moznaim* 37 (1973) p. 211.
7. See Numbers 13:3: כִּלְקַיִם אֲנֹשִׁים רָאשֵׁי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיוּ. See also, Genesis Rabbah 28:3.
8. Bava Batra 91a; Yalkut Shimoni 600.
9. The name Ruth is given a second interpretation in the Talmud as of the root רוּחַ [satiated]. This hints towards David, who satiated the Holy One Blessed Be He with psalms and praise. This is close to the etymological meaning of the name. See Zakovitz. It might also relate to the Moabite word רוּחַ which has a similar meaning. (This word is found in the text of Mesha's Stele, line 12.). Zakovitz says that in Syrian, Ruth might be from the word רוּחַ, meaning "friendship."
10. See: Bava Batra 91a and Yalkut Shimoni 600. The author is instilling a feeling of destruction through these names.
11. This reminds us of the talmudic statement that Elimelech had enough for his family but left in order not to have to support those who might turn to him..See Note 7.

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12. See Genesis. 4:8, Deuteronomy. 21:1, 22: 25.

13. Bava Batra 91b.

14. In the first verse, the missing name of Elimelech is replaced by the word "man" [אִישׁ]. This specific literary style of calling him a "man" before mentioning his name refers to an important individual, as we explained above.

15. See Rashi.

16. See Genesis 21:1, 50:25; Exodus 3:16, 4:31.

17. See Bava Batra 14b. There is a dispute among modern Bible scholars on the date of the Book of Ruth. Many see it as an early text. The Septuagint places it after the Book of Judges, which would fit the opening of the Book of Ruth. This is also the opinion of Josephus (*Contra Apion* 1:8). Origin, who claims to have a biblical list based on Jewish tradition, combines it with the Book of Judges (see Eusebius H.E. VI:25), Zakovitz and Weinfeld place it in the early period of the kings of Judah. A. Cahane writes that it could not be later than the Babylonian Exile. A. Cahane, *HaTanach HaMeforash*, (Jerusalem: 1969) p. 73. S. Yeiven claims that it was written around the time of David, possibly for reasons of political propaganda. He cites the custom of removing the shoe (Ruth 4:7) mentioned in old Akkadian texts as well as the custom to place a child in your bosom as a sign of adoption (4:16) also found in Akkadian texts. One can add to this the term "אִישׁ בְּתוֹכִי" (3:16) which is an early form of the word "אִישׁ" as in Judges 18:8. Similar texts can be found in Ugaritic documents; see S.A. Loewenstamm, *Leshonenu* 23 (1959) p. 74.

18. This might not be accidental since the goal of the Book of Ruth seems to be the history of David's ancestry. See M. Weinfeld, p. 339. David's connection to Moab is also implied in I Samuel 22 3-4,

19. Sanhedrin 93a.

20. See also Sanhedrin 98a and *Safra De-Zniuta* Chapter 1.

21. See Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1, on the verse: *He shall kiss me from the kisses of his mouth* (SoS 1:2). See also Talmud Bavli, Megillah 7a.

22. Even though אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה can include masculine and feminine, it's obvious from what proceeds that this is the meaning. I thank Prof. A. Grossman for pointing out this idea to me.

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