

**THE ESCHATOLOGICAL MEANING
OF THE BOOK OF RUTH**
"BLESSED BE GOD: ASHER LO HISHBIT LAKH GO'EL"

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In this paper I will present what I believe to be a new understanding of a major leitmotiv of the book of Ruth: *ge'ulah* (redemption), and the theological context in which the work is to be understood.

It is likely that from the moment of its writing, the diminutive Book of Ruth was seen as an ethically compelling religious work of the highest order. We can surmise that its inclusion in the canon was based on several factors: 1. The genealogy of David. 2. The ubiquitous spirit of kindness, charity, and fidelity (*hesed shel emet*) which is the backdrop to the birth of David's grandfather Oved, and so ultimately of David himself. 3. The allusions to the laws found in the story of Judah, Tamar, and their son Perez (Genesis 38). 4. The Rabbis saw Divine involvement in the events of Ruth and inspiration in its composition. As is true of all great literature, they intuited deeper and higher meanings in the narrative configurations of the story.

Modern scholars have come to recognize significant biblical parallels to elements in the story of Ruth. However, they have failed to decipher the full religious nature of the book. To understand it requires that we examine key aspects of the book anew, as well as the biblical text which is most clearly linked to Ruth, the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. The similarities between the Judah-Tamar episode and Ruth have long been recognized. Foremost is the genealogical connection. King David is descended from both Tamar and Ruth. Both women are from proscribed nations, one a Canaanite (Gen. 38), the other a Moabite (Deut. 23:4). Both women display exemplary character, but must resort to some ruse in order to consummate levirate-like relationships after the death of their respective husbands. What has not been recognized in the Judah-Tamar account is the unmistakable symbolism in a prominent aspect of the story. The narrative hints at the future Davidic monarchy. Prior to having relations with Tamar, Judah undertakes to send her a

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kid from his flock as payment for her services, believing her to be a harlot. Tamar asks Judah to leave her a pledge in lieu of the payment. When Judah asks her to specify what she wants, she answers: *your seal and your cord, and the staff which you carry* (Gen. 38:18). In recognizing the staff as nothing other than the *royal scepter of Judah which will never pass* (Gen. 49:10), and the seal as the royal seal that is found throughout the Near East, we are given to understand that Tamar, in a biblically prophetic moment, is laying claim to the kings of Israel who will issue from her and Judah. Ruth, at a later date, as the great-grandmother of David, attains the same status.

There are two practices of note in Ruth, integral to the narrative, which appear to be variations of Torah laws. They are the law of land redemption and a form of levirate marriage. In the single Torah reference to levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-10) we are told that the obligation devolves only upon the deceased man's brothers, while in the book of Ruth, Boaz, and, we can assume, the primary *go'el* (Ruth 4:1) are unspecified relatives of Elimelech, Ruth's father-in-law.¹ The Torah law of land redemption appears in Leviticus 25:25-28. It takes effect when an individual has been forced to sell his ancestral land to an outsider, and allows either him, or a relative acting on his behalf, to redeem the land within a specific period of time. In chapter four of Ruth, these two laws are merged. Boaz informs the *go'el* who is first in line of his twofold duty: to redeem the land of *our kinsman Elimelech* which was in Naomi's possession (4:3-4), and to marry Ruth. *When you acquire the property from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabite, you must also acquire the wife of the deceased so as to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate* (4:5). The *go'el* agrees to redeem the land but demurs in regard to marrying Ruth, *lest it impair my own estate. You take over my right of redemption* (4:6). That is, if the *go'el* had children with Ruth, the inheritance of his other children would be compromised.

There are a number of discrepancies between these practices and Torah law. Foremost is the merger of land redemption and levirate marriage in Ruth, as distinct from their separate status in the Torah. The phrase which defines the purpose of levirate marriage in the Torah, *perpetuating the name of the deceased* (Deut. 25:7), appears in Ruth 4:10, but there it is also associated with the land redemption, *to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate*. Secondly, as already noted, neither Boaz nor the primary *go'el* is a

brother of Ruth's deceased husband as dictated by Torah law. Thirdly, in the Torah wives do not inherit their husbands (Num. 27:6-11), as appears to be the case with Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi. Clearly, in the Book of Ruth the process of redemption goes beyond the parameters set forth in Deuteronomy.

The modern approach towards resolving these discrepancies has been to assume that they reflect either variations in the laws depending on historical time and locale, or a developmental process in which the scope of the laws was either expanded or narrowed. In the second view, broadening the band of relatives who could marry the childless widow, as in Ruth, would enhance the prospects of fulfilling the laws' purpose of perpetuating the "name of the deceased"; conversely, narrowing the law to include only brothers would limit the band of responsibility to particular levirs.²

At first glance, it would indeed appear that the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis supports the view that there once existed a broad framework of the levirate obligation that included a father-in-law, parallel to Ruth's inclusion of relatives other than the deceased man's brother.³ I would argue instead that what transpired between Judah and Tamar is to be understood as an exceptional dispensation dictated by the Divine plan that the royal lineage of Judah emanate from Tamar. With the death of Er and Onan, and levirate marriage with Shelah ruled out, the exigencies in the situation mandated the Judah-Tamar relationship. Had Judah been duty bound to fulfill the levirate role with Tamar, she would not have needed to resort to her ruse in consummating their relationship; nor, I suggest, would Judah have rejected relations with his young daughter-in-law.

Regarding the discrepancies between the practices in the Book of Ruth and the Torah, we must understand the special role of *ge'ulah* (redemption) in Ruth. In Ruth, this term transcends its legal meaning as found in Deuteronomy, and the actions associated with this term transcend the purely legal boundaries of Deuteronomy. In the book of Ruth, the term *ga'al* (to redeem) resonates throughout the unfolding drama. It appears 17 times in noun and verbal form, starting with the ending of chapter two (2:20), where Naomi says to Ruth that *the man* (Boaz) *is our relative, one of our redeemers*. It reappears in 3:9, as Ruth tells Boaz, *you are a redeemer* and next in 3:12, where Boaz acknowledges to Ruth, *though I am a redeemer*.

In 4:1 we meet the *go'el* who is first in line. He is intentionally unnamed, being denied posterity because he has denied such posterity to others through his refusal to perpetuate the name of the deceased by fulfilling the *go'el* obligation. This anonymity allows the author, brilliantly, to present the *go'el* to us throughout chapter 4 as *sui generis*, "the redeemer." The meaning of the term *ga'al* in Ruth has never been in question, on understandable grounds, since in Ruth, without exception, and in the Torah, almost without exception, the term refers to reclaiming ancestral/familial property. We would have expected a broader connotation of the term in the Torah, but except for Exodus 6:6 and Exodus 15:13 this primary meaning holds true. This mundane understanding of *ga'al* in Ruth satisfies the legalistic, albeit ethical, understanding of the redemptive activity in the Book of Ruth, as it does in Deuteronomy 25. It fails, however, to heed the author's deeper eschatological allusions in his broad use of the term.

What is the deeper meaning of the term *ga'al* in Ruth, which in time comes to define the highest level of religious hope and fulfillment? I would define it as the sustaining and/or restoration of abundant life, both physical and spiritual. For the author of Ruth, *the upholding of the name of the deceased* in both levirate marriage and land redemption is more than a tangible memorial to the departed. It is a redemptive act that contributes to the continuation and sustaining of a life-force. The fuller implications of this idea for our understanding of Ruth will emerge ahead.

The antithesis of the life-force is death, which quickly makes its appearance in Ruth 1:3, with the death of Elimelech, and returns two verses later to claim his sons Mahlon and Chilion. Death overwhelms the life of one individual in particular, Naomi, the wife of Elimelech and mother of Mahlon and Chilion. A devastated Naomi is left with her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Naomi's relationship with these young women, at this point, is tenuous at best. What, after all, could remain of the relationship, since the young women, after mourning their losses, will each naturally seek *to find rest in the house of her (new) husband*, as Naomi painfully says to them (1:9). When Orpah leaves Naomi, it is with no meanness of spirit. She is entitled to move on, however much she may have felt for Naomi. Most women would have taken the same course. Had our story's Ruth done this, Naomi would likely have experienced the death of her world in her lifetime, bereft of her spouse,

children, and daughters-in-law. Instead, Ruth made renewed life possible for Naomi (*He will renew your life*, 4:15). In one of the Bible's most moving scenes, Ruth declared that she would never leave Naomi and that she would adopt Naomi's people and faith. However much pain Naomi had already endured, when she returned to the Land of Israel with Ruth at her side, Naomi knew that the spark of life within her had not been extinguished. On her return to Bethlehem, Naomi had despairingly told the women of the town, *call me Bitter [Marah], for the Lord has greatly embittered my lot* (1:20), but she would later declare, *Blessed be he [Boaz] of God, who has not ceased to show His kindness to the living and to the dead* (2:20).

Whereas, in the first three chapters of Ruth we encounter the *hesed shel emet* of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, when we enter the square of Bethlehem in chapter 4, we sense a transition from this state of magnanimity to a quest for *ge'ulah*. *Ge'ulah* encompasses the interrelated acts of land redemption and levirate-like marriage, both seeking to "perpetuate the name of the dead", but *ge'ulah* surpasses them. Later, when Ruth gives birth to Obed, the women of Bethlehem declare: *Blessed be the Lord Who has not withheld (lo hishbit) a redeemer from you* (4:14). The word *hishbit*, from the root *shavat*, more correctly denotes that God has not allowed something to be terminated or cut off. Failing the marriage of Ruth to Boaz, and the birth of their son Obed, the intended lineage through Ruth the Moabite, Boaz's wife and daughter-in-law of Naomi, would have been broken, and so Yishai (Jesse) and his son David, the future king of Israel, would not have been born. That lineage was not to be terminated. A correct rendering of biblical thought demands that this lineage was to issue both from the loins of Judah and Tamar, and later from Ruth and Boaz. Genesis promises that the royal scepter will never depart from the tribe of Judah (49:10), while the Book of Ruth, in its quest for a redeemer, promises that this royal line will never end. The Book of Ruth does acknowledge setbacks in the continuity of this line, as in the death of Naomi's two sons, but it declares as certain the perpetuity of the royal line.

Belief in the the Davidic line's perpetuity is a central component of messianic belief in Judaism. Most modern scholars maintain that belief in a messianic era and in a messianic figure is post-biblical.⁴ Yet, paradoxically, they acknowledge the existence of a messianic-like complex of beliefs beginning with the pre-exilic prophets of the seventh and eighth centuries BCE. An ex-

ample of this tension is found in the work of S. L. Gordon, an Israeli scholar of the mid-twentieth century. In his introduction to the Book of Isaiah, Gordon writes: "A description of the messiah in eschatological terms is not found in Scriptures..." Yet Gordon immediately observes: "This concept, if not in name, in its fullest sense is expressed by Isaiah in terms of an ideal king, the king of Zion, a branch of Yishai, who will be a symbol of perfection, the bearer of Divine justice for the people of Israel and all the peoples of the world."⁵

The biblical eschatological belief complex extended well beyond Isaiah, as outlined in Louis Hartman's prominent essay on the subject.⁶ A century after Isaiah, writes Hartman, Jeremiah "can be considered as practically eschatological throughout."⁷ Jeremiah frequently uses the phrase *hinneh yamim ba'im*,⁸ which is understood to be the equivalent of *aharit ha-yamim* (the end of days). Although Jeremiah lived through the destruction of the Temple, he believed in the steadfastness of God's covenant with the people of Israel (Jer. 31:31 ff., 33:14, 20-22) and in the promise that *there will never be an end to men of David's line who sit upon the throne of the House of Israel* (33:17). Like Isaiah, Jeremiah prophesied that in the end of days the Davidic king would be a *tzemah tzedakah*, a "righteous shoot" (33:15), through whom God would bring about a universal state of justice.

It is clear that messianic beliefs pertaining to the Davidic dynasty were firmly established in the First Temple period. Messianic belief by definition concerns the period of final redemption. Given the all-encompassing motif of redemption in Ruth, I propose that the book speaks to the messianic period and the final Davidic king. Modern biblical scholarship has failed to uncover this dimension of the book.

By way of summary, what we encountered in Ruth was the theme of redemption pertaining to all aspects of biblical narrative and law within the book. A bridge links Ruth to Genesis 38, involving the Divine guarantee that the enduring Davidic dynasty would emanate from Judah. Both accounts involve seemingly mundane "redemptive" acts which, on examination, are revealed to be religious in the deepest sense. The societal-ethical acts of land redemption and levirate marriage are religious imperatives which, in the Book of Ruth, become the human prerequisites in the broader plan of Divine Redemption. The acts of magnanimity and kindness in the story of Ruth are

urged on by the Divine promise of redemption, affirming that biblical ethics are rooted in the notion of and belief in a benevolent God. Man's ethical behavior is premised on belief in an ethical Creator.

The Bible and Rabbinic Judaism maintained that the last Davidic king would issue from Judah and his descendant, David. In the accounts of Judah and David set forth in Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth, women from the stock of Canaan (Tamar) and Moab (Ruth) are chosen to become progenitors of this king. Implicit in this is the harmony among men that will prevail in the messianic era.

In Ruth, we encountered the quest for a *go'el* in the narrow drama of Elimelech's family, while this was in fact part of a chain of events that would lead first to David and then to his last descendant who would reign over Israel. This last king is the true *go'el* toward whom Ruth points, one later to be known as the King Messiah. Similarly, the acts of *ge'ulah* in Ruth point to the final era of redemption in which this king will reign.

At the outset of Ruth we encountered a somber mood. Death had drawn its cruel sword and rendered grieving individuals bereft of hope. The "task" of Divine redemption in Ruth, it would seem, operates at both the collective and individual levels. When reading the Book of Ruth we may tend to overlook the individual's quest for redemption, which is not attained or absorbed in that of the nation. Theologically, no such bifurcation of salvation's reach can be justified. And if we attune our ear carefully to Ruth's message, we will hear it speaking to both dimensions of Redemption.

As we come to the end of Ruth, the weight of death is lifted from man and we glimpse the *ge'ulah-to-come*. Despair gives way to hope, and death to redemption and a renewal of life. *He will renew your life*, Naomi is told of the newborn child, Obed (4:15). Obed, Ruth's biological son, also becomes *the son born to Naomi* (4:17) whose world was darkened by death's ravages.

Neither Naomi nor Ruth knew her place in the saga of the *go'el*, although both would deserve to be part of the Divine promise that *lo hishbit lakh go'el* –in *other words*, God will not allow any force to impede the coming of the Redeemer.

NOTES

1. Boaz is described as a *moda le-ishah* (*moda* stemming from the root *yada*, "to know"), *from the family of Elimelech*. Perhaps the term implies a well-known relative (Ibn Ezra). *From the family of Elimelech* strongly rules out an understanding of the term to mean "a close friend", as some have suggested. Cf. E. F. Campbell Jr., *The Anchor Bible - Ruth*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1975) pp. 88-89.
2. H. H. Rowley, "The Marriage of Ruth," *Harvard Theological Review* (April 1947) pp. 77-99. Rowley notes that it "makes it probable that the law of Deuteronomy 25:5-10 reflects a limitation of something that was once wider in Israel, and this view is further supported when we look beyond the question of the childless widow, to the wider duties devolving on the next of kin." (p. 83). B. M. Burrows, "The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 59 (1940) pp. 445- 454. Campbell (p. 137) notes that the fact that we can find no legal code which puts the two together (redemption and levirate practices), as we find in Ruth, is "probably irrelevant and as much due to the paucity of our sources as to any other cause. It is perfectly plausible to speculate that the connection between the two was typical in Bethlehemite, or even generally in Judean village practice; it can be expected to have ratified itself easily in the mind of the ancient audience."
3. Nahmanides, Genesis 38:8, writes that the "natural merits of levirate practice were understood prior to Torah law."
4. "One can, therefore, only speak of the biblical pre-history of messianism": H. L. Ginsberg, "Messiah," in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd, 1971), 11:1407-8.
5. S. L. Gordon, *Isaiah* (Tel Aviv: S.L.Gordon Publishing, 1969) p. 25.
6. L. F. Hartman, "Eschatology," in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), 6:860-897.
7. Hartman, *ibid.*, 6:867.
8. Jeremiah 7:32; 9:24; 16:14; 19:6; 23:5, 7; 30:3; 31:26, 30, 36; 33:14; 48:12; 49:2; 51:47, 52.



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