

AMBIGUITY AND AUTHORITY IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

AND IT came to pass in the days when the judges judged, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Beth-lehem in Judah went to sojourn in the field of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons. And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Beth-lehem in Judah. And they came into the field of Moab, and continued there. And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons. And they took them wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth; and they dwelt there about ten years. And Mahlon and Chilion died both of them; and the woman was left of her two children and of her husband. Then she arose with her daughters-in-law, that she might return from the field of Moab; for she had heard in the field of Moab how that HaShem had remembered His people in giving them bread.

A lot happens in the first five verses of Ruth. Famine, exile, death, bereavement and loss - these are trial that test men's soul and stretch human capacities to the point of breaking. And where is God in all this? His name does not even come up until the 6th verse, "for she heard that the Lord blessed His people to give them bread".

Were all these a punishment for sin or was it something that just happened, another tragedy among many that accompany our sojourn in this world? If we were reading this story elsewhere and not in the Bible, would we recall that Providence directs and supervises all things? How different is the introduction to the story of Ruth from most other Biblical books, in which God is from the outset an active, determining and omnipresent force. Compare this beginning to the introduction to the story of Job. There, from the outset we know who determines, plans and arranges matters. It is as if the narrator wished to disguise the Director behind the scene. In this matter of fact retelling of events without their direct attribution to God, the Book of Ruth resembles the book of Esther, and no other Biblical book.

Closer inspection reveals that deliberate ambiguity is a general feature of this story. In fact, ambiguity of this kind is a prominent feature. Mordechai Cohen in a recent article (M. Cohen Hesed: Divine or human? The syntactic ambiguity of Ruth 2:20, in Hazon Nachum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought and History, eds. Y. Elman and J.S.Gurock, Ktav, 1977; see also, A Midrashic view of Ruth: Amidst a sea of ambiguity, Jewish Bible Quarterly XXXIII:2(130) points out a number of examples, among them the one in 2:20. As background, Boaz has just recognized Ruth as a relative and instructed his lads to help her glean in his fields. Since Hebrew does not use capitals, both of

these translations are possible and correct.

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he to the Lord, for he did not abandon his kindness to the living and to the dead".

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he to the Lord, Who did not abandon His kindness to the living and to the dead".

See the difference. The first reading praises Boaz for his Kindness while the second one praises Hashem. Or, take a look at this verse.

And it so happened that Ruth happened to come to the portion of the field that belonged to Boaz (2:3).

A reader of the story is struck and wonders. Was it really just a coincidence that Ruth "happened" to venture in the field that was owned by her eventual redeemer? Surely the Narrator does not mean it as it reads, for such an understanding is dissonant to the overall context and yet it is surely not accidental.

These verses are emblematic of the intentional ambiguity of the narrative. On one hand, the hand of God is so evident that it cannot be denied; on the other, the Author deliberately hides His hand in expressions and structures that suggests randomness and chance.

In that, the book of Ruth reflects life itself. At times, God is as distant as Heaven is from earth; at other times, He is as close as our own breath. These two perspectives are concurrent and complementary and it is between these two perspectives that we oscillate in an attempt to make sense of and surmount the challenges of religious life.

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