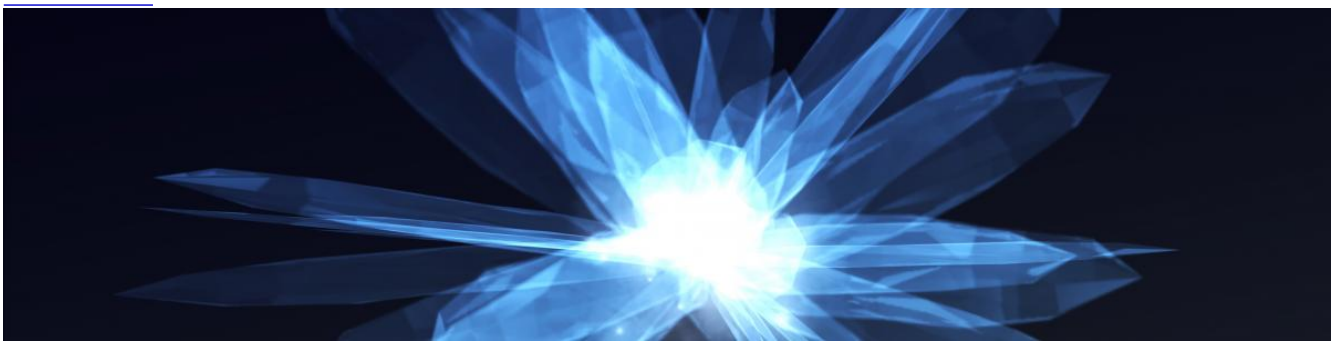
A WOMAN OF VALOR HAS BEEN FOUND

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Simple glass reflects the beam of light that shines on it only once. A precious gem, in contrast, reflects different sparks with its many facets; a single beam of light that shines on it is reflected and is returned to us greatly enhanced. ~ Feivel Meltzer [1]

INTRODUCTION

This analogy can serve as a guide for understanding a literary gem, Megillat Ruth. Seldom do we come across such an ideal society, characterized by hesed (loyalty, loving-kindness), heroes, and no villains. At worst, there are average characters such as Orpah, Boaz’s foreman, and So-and-so who serve as foils to highlight the greatness of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz.[2] R. Zeira’s classic statement captures the essence of the megillah:

R. Zeira said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanliness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness (Ruth Rabbah 2:14).

Although it appears that hesed is the predominant theme of our megillah, there is considerably less clarity over how to define that hesed, or what other religious lessons emanate from the text of Megillat Ruth. Which characters truly epitomize

R. Zeira’s statement? What is the relationship between divine providence and human hesed?
Although the surface reading of the Book of Ruth appears idyllic and straightforward, many elements in the book that initially appear clear are more elusive after further scrutiny. Rather than limiting ourselves to one side or another, it is preferable to see how these viewpoints coexist. By doing so, one stands to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the text and its messages.

Mordechai Cohen sets out two criteria for ascertaining deliberate ambiguities in a biblical text: (1) one must establish the cogency of two separate readings; (2) one must demonstrate how the ambiguity contributes to the literary context by expressing something that could not be expressed in unambiguous language.[3] Taking this argument to a different level, one might contend that much in Megillat Ruth fits these criteria. This chapter will consider some of the major issues of the megillah with an eye toward its overall purposes.

THE FIRST FIVE VERSES: PUNISHMENT FOR SINS?

The Book of Ruth opens in a jarring fashion, with Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion dying at the outset. Some midrashim and later commentators contend that Elimelech and his sons deserved their respective deaths. They maintain that Elimelech left the Land of Israel,[4] or a starving community behind,[5] while his sons lingered in Moab and intermarried. [6]

Perhaps the juxtaposition of Elimelech’s departure and his death and the juxtaposition of the sons’ marriages and their deaths suggest these conclusions. However, there is a ten-year gap between the sons’ marrying Moabites and their deaths (1:4). By including the lengthy time separating the two events, the megillah appears to exclude intermarriage as a direct cause of their deaths.[7] We also are not told how long Elimelech remained in Moab before he died. These uncertainties yield at least three possible lines of interpretation:

1. Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion simply died: They maintain that the family left during a famine for legitimate reasons. Ibn Ezra (on 1:2, 15) insists that Ruth and Orpah converted prior to their marriages to Elimelech’s sons. The book’s opening verses are primarily background setting the stage for the main story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, and should not be understood as punishment for sins.

2. This story is parallel to Job: Like Job, Naomi first complained about her God-given lot (1:20–21). The deaths and suffering at the outset of Ruth are

theologically significant, but the reader is not told how.

Unlike the Book of Job, however, where God's direct involvement is discussed in the beginning and end of the book, in Ruth it is not. Additionally, the characters in Megillat Ruth played an active role in changing their fate, whereas Job did not. It is unclear whether Megillat Ruth was intended to parallel the Book of Job or whether the two books should be contrasted, with Megillat Ruth's characters held responsible for their original suffering and credited for their eventual happiness. [8]

3. This is a story of God giving just recompense: Elimelech and his family are punished for leaving a starving community behind. The unwarranted lingering of Mahlon and Chilion in Moab led them to intermarry, causing their untimely deaths. Likewise, the happy ending of Megillat Ruth may be viewed as God's reward for the acts of hesed performed over the course of the story.

Does the text teach divine recompense? This reading is possible, but no more compelling than a non-recompense reading. This uncertainty encapsulates our difficulty in pinpointing any one specific interpretation of the ephemeral characters in the opening verses of Megillat Ruth. The initially straightforward narrative contains significant ambiguities that will continue throughout the book.

NAOMI

A second ambiguity is evidenced in the character of Naomi. It is unclear whether she was a passive follower of her husband, or an active participant in the abandonment of the community (assuming that there was anything negative about their leaving). Sensitive to the vagueness of the text, several midrashim address both sides of the question:

He was the prime mover and his wife secondary to him, and his two sons secondary to both of them (Ruth Rabbah 1:5). [9]

Why did the text mention him, his wife, and his children? To teach that all of them were stingy (Ruth Zuta 1:2).

From the text, it is difficult to determine whether Naomi did anything wrong, if she was an innocent victim of her family members' sins, or if she was a victim of the unexplained deaths of her family members.

The motives behind Naomi's efforts to persuade her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab also remain elusive. Although Naomi emphasized the marital prospects of

Ruth and Orpah (in 1:8–15), it is possible that she was driven by other considerations as well:

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Judah b. Haninah: Three times is it written here “turn back,” corresponding to the three times that a potential proselyte is repulsed; but if he persists after that, he is accepted (Ruth Rabbah 2:16).

Why did Naomi want to return them? So that she would not be embarrassed by them. We find that there were ten markets in Jerusalem, and they [the classes of people who shopped at each] never intermingled…. The people were recognized by their clothing—what one class wore, another would not (Ruth Zuta 1:8).

Ruth Rabbah 2:16 casts Naomi as unwilling to compromise Jewish religious standards. This view receives textual support from Naomi’s observation that Orpah’s return to Moab came with religious consequences as well: “So she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law’” (1:15; cf. Ibn Ezra, Malbim).

In contrast, Ruth Zuta 1:8 depicts a less flattering portrait of Naomi. Her professed concern for the welfare of her Moabite daughters-in-law cloaked a desire to protect her own noble self image in Judean society. The inordinate emphasis on Ruth as a “Moabite” (seven times in this tiny megillah) could support this reading as well.
Despite the potentially complex nature of her concern for their welfare, Naomi certainly emerged successful by the end of the narrative. She had her estate redeemed by Boaz; she was esteemed by her neighbors; and Ruth’s son was born into her family. It appears that there are several textually valid readings of Naomi’s character:

1. Naomi as a paragon of hesed: Who could ask for a better mother-in-law than Naomi? Bereft of her husband and sons, with only Ruth and Orpah to comfort her, Naomi was more concerned with their welfare than with tending to her own loneliness. Moreover, Naomi never stopped caring for Ruth, helping her find security via matrimony. As a consequence of her hesed, God rewarded Naomi at the end of the megillah with family, friends, and land (4:14–17).

2. Naomi as self-serving: Although Naomi always verbally expressed interest in her daughters-in-law, she really was more concerned for herself. She joined her family in abandoning her community. She wanted to drive her Moabite daughters-in-law away because they would harm her social status upon return. Naomi knew

she could benefit from Boaz's intervention; therefore, she orchestrated the encounter between Boaz and Ruth to help herself. Fittingly, the narrative concludes with Naomi's happiness—she took the child and had the blessings of her friends along with her land. Ruth is only a tangential figure in the megillah's climactic frame. [10]

3. Naomi as similar to Job: Naomi suffered without any explanation, complained against God, and then was restored in the end:

She said to them, Call me not Naomi; call me Mara; for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me (ki hemar Shaddai li me'od) (Ruth 1:20).

As God lives, who has taken away my judgment; and the Almighty, who has tormented my soul (ve-Shaddai hemar nafshi) (Job 27:2).

Although Naomi used similar language to that of Job, possibly indicating that she viewed herself as suffering unjustly, the narrator remains conspicuously noncommittal as to whether or not Naomi's story parallels that of Job.

4. Complexity: Naomi was concerned with herself, and also for Ruth. One might view the happy ending either as a consequence of Naomi's and the other characters' actions, or as a providential reward for her goodness, or some combination thereof. This view combines the first two explanations above, and each layer of motivation appears to be simultaneously sustained by the text.

BOAZ

Yet another ambiguity can be found in the person of Boaz. According to all readings, Boaz was a hero. He protected Ruth from harassment (2:9, 15) and helped her in other ways unbeknownst to Ruth (2:15–17). He provided sustenance for Naomi (3:15), completed the redemption of Naomi's field, and married Ruth (3:18–4:10). Boaz deserves praise for overcoming the anti-Moabite biases of Judean society.

However, Boaz allowed Ruth to glean for approximately three months (cf. Ruth Rabbah 5:11) and needed prodding from Naomi and Ruth before he took more substantial action. Why didn't he help earlier, especially given his awareness of Ruth's character and outstanding accomplishments (2:11–12)?

Perhaps the Moabite issue figures decisively in answering that question, since there was a stigma against marrying her. Additionally, Boaz assumed that he was too old so Ruth would not be interested in marrying him (3:10–11). These reasons

may explain Boaz's possible reluctance to marry Ruth; but how do we justify his allowing her to glean in his field for so long instead of giving her food and support directly? As Feivel Meltzer observes, "it is impossible to understand adequately why Boaz did not see it fit to visit the widows and attend their needs." [11]

Sensitive to these cues, some midrashim cast Boaz as one who acted kindly only when he knew he would receive something in return:

R. Isaac commented: The Torah teaches you that when a person performs a good deed he should do so with a cheerful heart.… If Boaz had known that the Holy One, blessed be He, would have it written of him that he "Gave her parched corn" (2:14), he would have given her fatted calves! (Lev. Rabbah 34:8).

Rabbah, son of R. Huna, said in the name of Rav: Ibzan is Boaz. What does he come to teach us?… Boaz made for his sons a hundred and twenty wedding feasts, for it is said, "And he [Ibzan] had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he sent abroad, and thirty daughters he brought in from abroad for his sons; and he judged Israel seven years" (Jud. 12:9); and in the case of every one [of these] he made two wedding feasts, one in the house of the father and one in the house of the father-in-law. To none of them did he invite Manoah, [for] he said, "Whereby will the barren mule repay me?" All these died in his lifetime (Bava Batra 91a).

Boaz certainly is a paragon of hesed. At the same time, however, these midrashim view Boaz's hesed as insufficient and motivated at least partially by his own interests. Both lines of interpretation are simultaneously supported by the text.

DIVINE–HUMAN CONTINUUM IN MEGILLAT RUTH

There is an apparent ambiguity in 2:20 concerning Naomi's gratitude upon learning that Ruth was gleaning in Boaz's field:

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed is he to the Lord, who has not abandoned His kindness with the living and with the dead."

or
Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed to the Lord is he who has not abandoned his kindness with the living and with the dead." [12]

It is unclear whether Naomi acknowledged God for orchestrating Ruth's chancing upon Boaz's field, or whether she blessed Boaz for his efforts in treating Ruth well and for his potential as a redeemer. Mordechai Cohen views this verse as

intentionally ambiguous, highlighting the complex relationship between human and divine action in Megillat Ruth. This ambiguity runs throughout the megillah, as it often is unclear where human initiative stops and God's intervention begins.

While Boaz blessed Ruth by saying that God should reward her for coming under His wings (tahat kenafav, 2:12), Ruth eventually realized that nothing would get done unless Boaz actively spread his "wings" over Ruth (u-parasta kenafekha al amatekha, 3:9). Earlier, Naomi had prayed that God grant marital security (menuhah) to her daughters-in-law (1:9); but she ultimately had to orchestrate the threshing floor scene to provide that manoah, "security," for Ruth (3:1). One might view the happy ending as a consequence of the concerted actions of the characters. It is equally possible to view the human actions as mirroring God's plan—the divine blessings people had wished on one another had been realized.

It is noteworthy that the only two times the narrator explicitly mentions God's involvement are regarding the end of the famine (1:6)—which is presented only as something Naomi heard—and Ruth's getting pregnant (4:13).[13] The omission of such references in the rest of the narrative leaves the extent of God's involvement subject to speculation. According to one reading, the megillah teaches that God "withdrew" Himself to allow greater human action. According to another, it reveals God's providential hand constantly assisting these paragons of hesed.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RUTH AND JUDGES

The opening verse of Megillat Ruth connects the narrative to the period of the Judges. What is the connection between the Dark Age of Judges and the display of hesed in Megillat Ruth, where the Judeans were religiously faithful and kind to one another?

The megillah does not offer greater precision in dating the narrative than that it occurred in the period of the Judges—a period spanning centuries. Some midrashim link Ruth to the time of the earlier judges,[14] while others identify Boaz with the later judge Ibzan (Jud. 12:8). [15] Malbim, however, suggests that the story of Ruth is not dated precisely, casting it as representative of the entire period.

How Megillat Ruth is representative of the period of the Judges, however, remains problematic. Malbim asserts that the opening verses of Megillat Ruth highlight the negative atmosphere of Judges. These verses demonstrate that people were concerned primarily for themselves, and this selfishness was characteristic of the

period. According to Malbim, Megillat Ruth's connection to the period of Judges is limited primarily to its opening verses. In contrast, the remainder of Megillat Ruth is characterized by hesed.

Alternatively, one might argue that Megillat Ruth is characteristic of the period, but in a more complex manner. Most people were generally righteous or at least average. However, the unwillingness of individuals to help one another except when they could gain themselves, demonstrates a general lack of hesed. The Talmud cited earlier regarding Boaz—one of the great figures of that era—captures this theme (Bava Batra 91a). Boaz certainly demonstrated hesed in the megillah; but the Talmud accuses even this hero of not inviting Samson's father Manoah to his children's wedding feasts since he would not receive a reciprocal invitation. To remedy this societal problem, and to break out from the cycle of the period, the Israelites needed an outsider like Ruth to teach them what true hesed was. One midrash captures this message:

God said: may Ruth, who is a convert, and who did not challenge her mother-in-law—come and rebuke Israel who has rebelled against Me (Ruth Zuta 1:7).

This midrash looks beneath a superficial reading of Megillat Ruth, where the Judeans are not depicted as "rebels." Instead, the midrash forges an intimate connection between Megillat Ruth and Judges and determines the root problem inherent in Israel's society to be selfishness.

CONCLUSION

Ruth is the only character in the megillah who is unambiguously positive, as she reflects genuine hesed. She sacrificed heroically to accompany Naomi and to accept God. A textual parallelism points to Ruth being compared to Abraham in leaving her family to serve God:

The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing" (Gen. 12:1–2).

Boaz said in reply [to Ruth], "I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before" (Ruth 2:11).

In light of this comparison, one might argue that Ruth is portrayed even more favorably than Abraham. God spoke directly to Abraham and promised him reward. In contrast, Ruth came voluntarily and hardly could have expected anything but a lifetime of begging and discrimination in return for her sacrifices. Ruth also declined marriage opportunities with younger Judeans in order to marry Boaz in order to preserve Mahlon's name.

The ambiguity of Ruth's world is reflected in the many ambiguous characters and circumstances presented by the text. The extent of God's intervention in her suffering and salvation is unclear, as are the motivations of the members of the society on whom she depended. Nevertheless, she remained steadfast in her commitment to Naomi, Mahlon, and God. Ruth has the distinction of being the only biblical woman explicitly called by the epithet eshet hayil, "woman of valor" (3:11). While Ruth struggled mightily to preserve Mahlon's name, she in fact has immortalized her own name, winning the hearts of readers generation after generation.

Megillat Ruth is characterized by deliberate ambiguity. Not only are multiple readings possible; these ambiguities are precisely the vehicles through which the short narrative captures so many subtleties in so short a space.

NOTES

[1]Da'at Mikra: Ruth, in Five Megillot (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1973), introduction p. 3 n. 1.

[2] See especially Meltzer, introduction to Da'at Mikra: Ruth, p. 8; Moshe Garsiel, "Literary Structure, Development of Plot, and the Goal of the Narrator in Megillat Ruth" (Hebrew), in Hagut ba-Mikra, vol. 3, ed. E. Menahem (Tel Aviv: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1979), pp. 66–83.

[3] Mordechai Cohen, "Hesed: Divine or Human? The Syntactic Ambiguity of Ruth 2:20," in Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm, ed. Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1997), pp. 11–38, esp. pp. 32–33.

[4] See Bava Batra 91a; Gen. Rabbah 25:3; Rashi (on 1:2).

[5] See Ruth Rabbah 1:4; Tanhuma Behar 3; Zohar Hadash Ruth 77b; Rashi (on 1:2).

[6] See Ruth Rabbah 2:9; Targum (on 1:4), Rashi (on 1:12), Malbim (on 1:4), who maintain that Ruth and Orpah did not convert prior to their marriages to Mahlon and Chilion. Ibn Ezra (on 1:2, 15) disagrees, as does Zohar Hadash Ruth 79a. Rambam (Hil. Melakhim 5:9) maintains that the family members were punished because they were communal leaders and therefore held to a higher standard of conduct. Malbim adopts a middle position: the initial departure of Elimelech and

family was justified, since they went only as a temporary measure (la-gur); once they elected to stay permanently, however (va-yeshevu sham), they brought punishment upon themselves.

[7] Sensitive to this difficulty, Tanhuma Buber Behar 8 states: “For those ten years, God was warning them. When He saw that they were not repenting, He began to strike their camels and cattle—yet they still did not repent. When He saw that they did not repent, immediately (!) ‘Mahlon and Chilion died also.’” See also Ruth Zuta 1:4: “This teaches that decrees are suspended for ten years.” Of course, without these modifications, the text is far less clear in presenting their deaths as punishment.

[8] See further discussion in R. Amnon Bazak, “The World Is Built on Hesed: Between Megillat Ruth and Job” (Hebrew), Megadim 18–19 (1993), pp. 169–175.

[9] Cf. Rashi, Malbim.

[10] The dialogue in chapter 4 intimates that Boaz considered Naomi’s field to be the primary element in the redemption altogether; Ruth is mentioned only in passing (4:3, 9–10). Ezra Z. Melammed (“Megillat Ruth in Light of the Halakhah” [Hebrew], Sinai 24 [1961], p. 156) maintains that Ruth was the more important aspect of the deal, but Boaz emphasized the field out of respect for Ruth.

[11] Meltzer, Da’at Mikra: Ruth, p. 16, n. 20.

[12] See the survey of opinions on this verse in Cohen, “Hesed: Divine or Human? The Syntactic Ambiguity of Ruth 2:20,” pp. 11–38. The above translations are from his article, pp. 11–12.

[13] The formulation that God “gave her pregnancy” (va-yitten lah herayon) is unique in Tanakh. Perhaps this expression signals divine approval of the union of Boaz with the Moabite Ruth (Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, The Jewish Publication Society Commentary: Ruth [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011], introduction p. li).

[14] Ruth Rabbah 1:1; Seder Olam Rabbah 12; cf. Makkot 23a.

[15] Bava Batra 91a.