RUTH AND THE REDEMPTION OF HESED: LITERARY ECHOES AND THEOLOGICAL VISION

View PDF

Rabbi Hayyim Angel is National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. He teaches advanced Tanakh classes at Yeshiva University. This article appears in issue 47 of Conversations.

The Book of Ruth is deceptively simple. Beneath its surface simplicity lies a sophisticated interplay of theology and literary allusion.

A short story of personal loss and familial loyalty, it has long served as a model of interpersonal kindness and devotion. Yet when studied in its full literary and intertextual
richness, Ruth reveals itself as a sophisticated theological and narrative statement. It
enters into deliberate dialogue with earlier biblical texts, especially those that speak to the
precarious position of women, the persistence of family, and the covert workings of
divine providence. And at the heart of it all is a profound meditation on hesed—covenantal love that exceeds duty.

Biblical Parallels: Lot, Tamar, Ruth

One of the most intriguing literary patterns in Ruth is its engagement with earlier stories of women on the margins who act courageously to preserve their family line. As

Harold Fisch 101 and several later scholars have observed, Ruth's story parallels the accounts of Lot's daughters (Genesis 19) and Tamar (Genesis 38).

In each of these stories, a woman is left with no clear future. Lot's daughters, believing that they have no other means of having children, intoxicate their father and bear sons—Moab and Ben-ammi. Tamar, left an agunah (chained woman) by Judah's refusal to grant her marriage to Shelah, disguises herself and seduces Judah. Ruth's actions are far more modest, yet she too acts decisively and risks personal dignity at the threshing floor with Boaz to preserve her husband's lineage. In all three cases, women act with unconventional initiative in a male-dominated world—often through situations charged with sexual or moral ambiguity.

Yet, the differences are critical. Tamar uses deception to unmask Judah's failure; Ruth is transparent and modest. Judah is at fault for Tamar's hardship; Boaz is consistently noble. The text of Ruth invites us to feel the sexual tension of the night scene (Ruth 3)—with bathing, perfuming, wine, and secrecy—but denies any impropriety. As Yonatan Grossman observes, the story channels seduction only to subvert it. Ruth proposes marriage—not illicit contact—and Boaz responds with restraint and honor. The sexual charge becomes the backdrop for moral choice.

All three stories—Lot, Tamar, and Ruth—also converge in the emergence of royal lineage. From Ruth and Boaz comes David, Israel's greatest king. And from the shadows of moral ambiguity arises the messianic line.

This genealogy is not incidental. The Talmud (Yoma 22b) explains that Jewish leadership must descend from flawed ancestry—"a box of creeping things

hanging
behind him" (a proverbial reminder of humble or morally complex origins)—so that a
leader remains humble. David's roots in Moab and Perez reflect this. The Torah prohibits
Moabite men from entering the congregation of Israel due to a national failure of hesed
(Deuteronomy 23:4–5).

In stark contrast with the Torah's depiction of Moabite inhospitality, Ruth's hesed is radical. She sacrifices homeland, family, and future to accompany Naomi. In doing so,
she offers a redemptive counterpoint to the trajectory of her ancestor Lot, who separated

from Abraham and moved toward Sodom, the city of anti-hesed. Where Lot separated
from Abraham in pursuit of self-interest and eventually aligned with Sodom, Ruth clings
to Naomi in an act of selflessness. Her hesed reverses the spiritual rupture between
Abraham and Lot. As Jeremy Schipper notes, the parallel language of p-r-d (separate,
Genesis 13:9, 11, 14; Ruth 1:17) and immo (with him, Genesis 13:1; Ruth 1:17) reflects
this narrative reversal. Ruth clings where Lot parted.

Hesed as the Driver of Redemption

Ruth's choice to follow Naomi is not only personally noble—it is spiritually transformative. Her hesed mirrors that of Rebekah in Genesis 24, another figure whose
generous, unhesitating kindness marked her as a matriarch. Both narratives include divine
providence (mikreh) and uncommon human goodness, with the Book of Ruth's lo azav
hasdo (did not abandon his loyalty-kindness 2:20) echoing the same phrase used of God

in Genesis 24:27. 104 But whereas Rebekah's story is accompanied by explicit divine guidance and prayer, Ruth's story is ambiguous regarding Providence.

A midrash (Genesis Rabbah 85:1) expresses this beautifully. While the patriarchs and their sons were caught in personal crises, God, the midrash teaches, was busy "creating the light of the messianic king," referring to the creation of King David. In Ruth's world too, individual choices seem local—but from them radiate the light of redemption.

Symbolism and Subtle Irony

The text of Ruth may be sparse, but it is densely meaningful. Names and places potentially carry both symbolic and realistic dimensions, even if they also reflect reality.
As Meltzer and others suggest, famine in Bethlehem ("House of Bread") is deeply ironic.
That Elimelech chooses to flee to Moab, the nation known for stinginess, sharpens the moral tension. A midrash (Ruth Zuta 1:4) notes this potential irony, as does the Vilna Gaon.

Even personal names may carry potential symbolism. Biblical naming often walks the line between literary and historical realism. Mahlon and Chilion, Naomi's sons, have been interpreted as names foreshadowing their deaths—erasure and destruction (Ruth Rabbah 2:5). Whether this is historical or literary naming, the association reinforces the tragedy. The anonymous Peloni Almoni, who refuses redemption, becomes a literary symbol of missed opportunity—nameless, faceless, forgotten (Rashi). Orpah, who turns away from Naomi, is linked to the Hebrew oref (nape), reinforcing her image as

one who
turns her back in contrast to Ruth, who looks forward and acts (Ruth Rabbah 2:9). As Yael Ziegler and others have shown, the etymologies of Ruth's name offered in rabbinic and modern literature—compassion, vision, dedication, friendship—form a
composite portrait of her character. 106 She is an outsider who becomes a moral center of
Israelite identity.

The Challenge of Literary Reading

Amid this richness, readers face a methodological question: where does interpretation end and invention begin? Ibn Ezra's comment on Ruth 2:17—"sometimes,
it is simply what happened"—cautions us not to force meaning onto every detail. But the
literary artistry of Ruth suggests that many of these connections are real, even if not
provable. The author writes with careful economy and layered resonance. We are meant
to hear echoes and ponder implications.

Conclusion

The Book of Ruth is not merely a story of private grief or personal redemption. It is a work of profound theological and literary depth, charting the transformation of
tragedy into destiny through the power of hesed. By echoing earlier biblical stories and
reframing them in moral clarity, Ruth emerges as a counter-narrative—women whose
courage builds rather than disrupts, who act boldly yet nobly, who bring light into the
world not through conquest, but through kindness and loyalty.