Light and Shadows in Ruth

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Rabbi Uzi Weingarten teaches a weekly no-charge class, via Zoom, titled "To Walk with God: An exploration of the moral and spiritual teachings of Tanakh." The class is open to all, Jews and non-Jews. It meets Sun evenings at 7:30 PM, EDT, and repeats Tues evenings at the same time. He can be reached at uziteaches@gmail.com

The book of Ruth is traditionally read of the festival of Shavuot. According to a famous Midrash,
the book was written to teach about the power of kindness. And indeed, the two major themes
of the book are Ruth's kindness to her mother-in-law Naomi and Boaz's kindness to Ruth, which
eventually leads to him marrying her.

Something unique about the book of Ruth is that it does not say an unkind or critical word
about any of the characters. This does not mean that the author approves of all that they say
and do; he does not. There are 'light' and 'shadows' in the book of Ruth.

The difference is in how things are presented. The author spells out the light; he indicates the
shadows through a variety of literary techniques. With that in mind, let us look at the first
interaction between Boaz and Ruth (2:4-12), and see both the 'light' and the 'shadows.'

Chapter 2 opens with Ruth going to glean, that is, “to gather grain or other produce left by reapers.” It was an ancient practice among Jews to allow the poor to go after the reapers and glean. The modern equivalent of gleaning would be going to a food pantry or a soup kitchen.
That Ruth goes to glean indicates how dire her financial situation is.

When Boaz arrives at the field and sees a woman whom he does not recognize, he asks the foreman about her. The foreman replies:
She is a Moabite young woman
Who returned with Naomi from the plains of Moab (2:6)

On one hand, what the foreman says is factually correct. Ruth is indeed a Moabite young woman, and she has in fact returned with Naomi from the plains of Moab. But what is entirely missing is the context. The foreman is selective about what he mentions. He identifies Ruth by

her association with Naomi and by her tribe of origin, at a time when neither of those was perceived favorably.

The townsfolk feel that Naomi abandoned and betrayed them in their time of distress and went to the greener pastures of Moab (1:1). And Ruth, “the Moabite young woman, who returned with Naomi from the plains of Moab,” is the living symbol of that betrayal.

What the foreman ignores is that Ruth herself is blameless. She abandoned nobody. On the contrary, she refused to abandon Naomi, even when Naomi, concerned that Ruth might not find a husband in Judah, implored her to turn back (1:16-17).

We then hear what Boaz says. Boaz does not mention Moab by name. He speaks about Ruth not being native to Judah, but in the context of her kindness, and the great personal sacrifice

that Ruth's kindness involves:
I was told all that you did for your mother-in-law.
You left your father and your mother and the land of your birth
And you went to a people that you did not know previously.

Finally, Boaz praises the spiritual aspect of Ruth's journey. Leaving everything behind and
accompanying Naomi involved an act of trusting God. This is the import of Boaz saying:
… the Lord, God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to shelter.

Boaz does not mention Moab or Naomi by name. Instead, he speaks about how Ruth left her
native land to do kindness to her mother-in-law. Not Moab, but "your native land"; not Naomi,
but "your mother-in-law"; and the all-important motive of kindness: "all that you have done for
your mother-in-law after your husband died." To all this, he adds the spiritual component of
trusting God, which gave Ruth the courage to undertake this venture.

By contrasting the two responses, the author of Ruth signals to us the difference between
discernment and prejudice. Boaz discerns; he looks at Ruth based on her actions and her
motives. He does not hold her responsible for the actions of others.

The foreman does the opposite. He does not see Ruth for who she is, but rather for her family
and tribe. That is prejudice.

And these attitudes then play out at the level of action. The bitterness that the foreman feels
towards Naomi allows him to mistreat Ruth. When she asks for permission to glean, the
foreman ignores her request (2:7). He does not even respond to her. It does not trouble him
that a desperately poor woman is waiting in the field "from the morning until now," in the hope
that when the landlord arrives he will allow her to glean.

Boaz, who sees Ruth in the context of her kindness, does much more than allow her to glean.
He also tells her, three times in a row, to glean only in his field, and alludes to the reason: “I
have commanded the young men not to touch you” (2:8-9). He follows this with other acts of
kindness, at the meal break and afterward (2:14-16).

For those who wish to walk with God, there is a teaching here about how to view others, how
to speak about them and how to treat them.

And here is a closing thought. Ruth ‘came to shelter under the wings of the God of Israel’ (2:12);
Boaz takes her under his wings by protecting her. Later, Ruth will ask Boaz to “spread his wing
over her” (3:9) by marrying her. And from that marriage, the product of the kindness of Ruth to
Naomi and of Boaz to Ruth, King David is born three generations later. And from his

descendants will ultimately come the messiah. As the Midrash says, the book of Ruth was
written to teach the power of kindness.