

Ruth the Moabite and the Blessing of Foreigners

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THE BOOK OF RUTH is one of the most compelling stories ever written, not just because, in Phyllis Trible's words, it is a "perfect example of the art of telling a story,"¹ but because it raises fundamental questions about divine purpose and human destiny. In no other story is the mysterious relation between divine promise and human response so subtly pondered, the potential of female power within male-dominated society so discreetly reflected on, the paradox of familial inclusivity within a Creation divided and separated by ethnic exclusivity so gingerly contemplated.²

Contemporary literary analysis of the book is characterized by two approaches: one synchronic,³ the other increasingly structuralist.⁴ Historical questions often lead to theories about the book's coming from a premonarchic

¹ Phyllis Trible, "Ruth," *ABD*, 5. 842.

² D. N. Fewell and D. M. Gunn (*Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* [Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990]) show a keen interest in exploiting Ruth's conflicts (sometimes to unwarranted extremes).

³ One premier example is the exhaustively thorough monograph of H. H. Witzernath, *Das Buch Rut: Eine literaturwissenschaftliche Untersuchung* (SANT 40; Munich: Kösel, 1975).

⁴ For example, S. Bertman, "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *JBL* 84 (1965) 165-68; M. J. Bernstein, "Two Multivalent Readings in the Ruth Narrative," *JSOT* 50 (1991) 15-26; R. Grant, "Literary Structure in the Book of Ruth," *BSac* 148 (1991) 424-41. See especially the rousing debate initiated by D. N. Fewell and D. M. Gunn ("A Son is Born to Naomi," *JSOT* 40 [1988] 99-108), answered by P. W. Coxon ("Was Naomi a Scold? A Response to Fewell and Gunn," *JSOT* 45 [1989] 25-37), answered back by Fewell and Gunn ("Is Coxon a Scold? On Responding to the Book of Ruth," *JSOT* 45 [1989] 39-43).

period,⁵ a monarchic period,⁶ a postmonarchic period,⁷ or an extended period involving all three.⁸ I will not attempt to address these issues directly, but with a longitudinal traditio-historical approach I will attempt to examine the ברוך blessings in Ruth against the Hebrew Bible's traditions of blessing more generally. To anticipate my conclusions: I will argue that the blessing of Boaz in Ruth 3:10 and the blessing of the women of Bethlehem in Ruth 4:14-15 are best interpreted as elements of a particular subset of the Hebrew Bible's blessing traditions, a subset I will call the blessing-of-foreigners trajectory. I will present the evidence for this thesis below (1) by introducing the history of research on the blessing traditions, (2) by articulating the blessing-of-foreigners trajectory, (3) by analyzing the blessings of Boaz and the women of Bethlehem within this trajectory, (4) by reflecting on the transformations of this trajectory in *Targum Ruth* and the Babylonian Talmud, and (5) by reflecting on the impact which an understanding of this trajectory might have on contemporary interpretations of Ruth.

I. The Blessing Traditions of the Old Testament

In 1929, Albrecht Alt carefully investigated the tension in the patriarchal traditions between the promise of many descendants and the promise of a homeland.⁹ On the basis of a rather atomistic yet academically fashionable literary analysis of Genesis 15, Alt concluded that the promise of descendants was older than the promise of land.

Though many of Alt's peers agreed that he had correctly identified two of the most important promises to the patriarchs, few agreed with his dating

⁵ According to *b. B. Bat.* 14b, Samuel authored the book.

⁶ R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 1062; Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth* (AB 7; New York: Doubleday, 1975) 24; Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 35.

⁷ J. Vesco, "La date du Livre de Ruth," *RB* 74 (1967) 245-47; A. Lacocque, "Date et milieu du livre de Ruth," *RHPR* 59 (1979) 588-89.

⁸ G. S. Glanzman, "The Origin and Date of the Book of Ruth," *CBQ* 21 (1959) 201-7. Note also that André Lemaire ("Une inscription phénicienne découverte récemment et le mariage de Ruth la Moabite," *EI* 20 [1989] 124-29) claims to have found evidence for something resembling the גאולה (Ruth 4:7) in a Phoenician inscription of the seventh century B.C.E. found at Cebel Ires Daği (first edited by P. Mosca and J. Russell). If this is correct, it should have an immediate impact on the question of Ruth's date.

⁹ A. Alt, *Der Gott der Väter* (BWANT 3/12; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1929); reprinted in *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel I* (Munich: Beck, 1959) 1-78; Engl. tr. "The God of the Fathers," *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966; reprinted, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989) 1-77.

of them. Gerhard von Rad, for example,¹⁰ and Martin Noth,¹¹ glossed over their conclusions to emphasize what they considered to be the more important issue, namely, that because the promise of land so directly energizes the construct of promise and fulfillment knitting the narratives of the patriarchs, the exodus, and guidance into the land into a unified whole, it should be recognized as the most important of the patriarchal promises, regardless of its standing in the history of traditions.

In another response, Walther Zimmerli agreed with Alt that the promise of land did have a significant function in the original patriarchal promises, yet he firmly disagreed with Alt's late dating of it.¹² Jacob Hoftijzer, reading Genesis 15 as a literary unit, read both promises on the same plane. In fact, he saw them as sequential, the promise of land being Abraham's immediate reward for trusting in the promise of many descendants.¹³

It was Hans Walter Wolff, however, who finally saw that there was a fundamental sociohistorical difference between the two promises. The promise of land, Wolff argued, is confirmed via an oath, but the promise of descendants is rooted in divine blessing. The latter promise is the essential element in Yahweh's desire to reclaim his creation (Gen 12:1-4a), and it is in no way dependent on Israel's covenantal response. Each promise, in other words, arises out of a different *Sitz im Leben*, and these two *Sitze* cannot be confused with each other if the patriarchal promises are to be interpreted adequately.¹⁴ Thus Wolff moved the discussion about the patriarchal promises to a new plane, with two significant results. First, he applied contemporary form criticism to pentateuchal studies by focusing attention on the variegated *Sitze im Leben* out of which each promise arose (regardless of date). Second, by so doing, he moved the discussion about these promises away from simplistic typological schemas and uncertain chronological speculations to broader questions about the nature, function, and purpose of the Hebrew traditions of blessing.

¹⁰ G. von Rad, "Verheissenes Land und Jahwes Land," *ZDPV* 66 (1943) 191-204; Engl. tr. "Promised Land and Yahweh's Land," *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966) 79-102.

¹¹ M. Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972) 54-58; German original, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1948.

¹² W. Zimmerli, "Verheissung und Erfüllung," *EvT* 12 (1952-53) 34-59; Engl. tr. "Promise and Fulfillment," *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (ed. C. Westermann; tr. J. L. Mays; Richmond: John Knox, 1963) 89-122.

¹³ J. Hoftijzer, *Die Verheissungen an die drei Erzväter* (Leiden: Brill, 1956).

¹⁴ H. W. Wolff, "Das Kerygma des Jahwisten," *EvT* 24 (1964) 73-98; Engl. tr. "The Kerygma of the Yahwist," W. Brueggemann and H. W. Wolff, *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* (Richmond: John Knox, 1975) 41-66. Claus Westermann (*The Promises to the Fathers* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980]; German original, FRLANT 116; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976) confirmed and developed Wolff's form-critical insight.

II. The Blessing-of-Foreigners Trajectory

We could pause right here and, without proceeding further, examine the Book of Ruth against the background of these same traditions of blessing, for the simple reason that the Book of Ruth speaks very clearly to the Israelite hope for descendants. Most students of Ruth agree that one of the main reasons why the תולדות genealogy concludes the book (regardless of when or how it got there) is to make sure that readers indeed bring to mind this ancient patriarchal promise of descendants, particularly the way in which the arrival of a particular descendant, David, eventually proved to be a great blessing allowing fulfillment of the words of Genesis, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3; 28:14).¹⁵

But the Book of Ruth comes into much sharper focus when we read it as something more than a messianic hymn to David, much more than a quasi-political response to postexilic problems with interracial marriage. The story of Ruth is fundamentally the story of a foreigner (גכרייה, Ruth 2:10) who blesses and is blessed by God’s chosen people in a profoundly important way.¹⁶ Ruth the Moabite is simply one of several foreigners who crosses paths with Israel during its long history. To engage the book at this level, however, we will need to read it with a view to ascertaining whether the blessings pronounced in Ruth are at all similar or dissimilar to those pronounced in other international encounters. We will need to discover how these blessings fit into the larger story of Israel’s redemption, and we will need to ask whether, and how, these incidents can be described within a recognizable range of sociohistorical and literary criteria.¹⁷

A. The Blessing of Melchizedek

The first of these international encounters involving a blessing occurs very near the beginning of the Hebrew Bible. In Gen 14:19-20, Melchizedek blesses Abraham:

Blessed be Abram before El Elyon,	ברוך אברם לאל עליון
Creator of heaven and earth.	קנה שמים וארץ
And blessed be El Elyon,	וברוך אל עליון
who delivers your adversaries into your hand.	אשר מגן צריך בידך

¹⁵ Kirsten Nielsen (“Stamtavle og fortælling i Ruths bog,” *DTT* 57 [1994] 81-93) rejects the view that the genealogy in Ruth 4:18-22 was secondary, arguing not only that it was original but that it even inspired the author to write the entire book as a final “patriarchal narrative,” using the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) as a model. See also Hubbard, *Book of Ruth*, 23: “while certainty eludes us, there is good reason to assume that the genealogy formed an original part of the book.”

¹⁶ W. S. Prinsloo (“The Theology of the Book of Ruth,” *VT* 30 [1980] 341) intuitively recognizes this when he speaks of “an additional level of meaning” in Ruth, “in that the blessings of Yahweh are shown not to be confined to a single family but to extend much further.”

¹⁷ In many ways the present study is an attempt to continue the discussion begun long ago by Kurt Galling, *Die Erwählungstraditionen Israels* (BZAW 48; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1928).

As is well known, the factuality of this encounter has long been debated. Maximalists vehemently argue for at least a “historical kernel” here, while minimalists assign the entire story of Melchizedek, including this blessing, to the realm of literary legend.¹⁸ One is tempted to enter into this debate, but our concern lies elsewhere. We simply want to point out the following characteristics. First, in terms of structure, the text, with its two parallel bicola, has a regular metric pattern, 8-8-8-8. This pattern is very similar to that found in other blessings of foreigners (e.g., in Num 24:3-9). Second, the name El Elyon, well attested at both Ugarit and Sefire, occurs twice here.¹⁹ At each occurrence it is governed by an active participle of a verb (מָגַן and קָנָה).²⁰ Each verb emphasizes the beneficent power of the deity authorizing Melchizedek to pronounce this blessing.

In short, the blessing of Melchizedek is a rather typical בְּרוּךְ formula pronounced over an Israelite leader by a foreign priest in a southern locale, on a cultic occasion specially apt for this purpose.

B. The Blessing of Jethro

In Exod 18:10-11, near the beginning of the wandering in the wilderness, another foreign priest pronounces a blessing under similar circumstances:

Blessed be Yhwh who has saved you	בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל אֶתְכֶם
from the hand of Egypt and Pharaoh,	מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וּמִיַּד פַּרְעֹה
Who has saved the people	אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל אֶת הָעָם
from the suffocating power of Egypt.	מִתַּחַת יַד מִצְרַיִם
Now I know that Yhwh is greater	עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי גָדוֹל יְהוָה
than all the gods,	מִכָּל הָאֱלֹהִים
Because of this word,	כִּי בִדְבַר
when they defamed them [his people]. ²¹	אֲשֶׁר דָּוָו עֲלֵיהֶם

¹⁸ On the use of the terms “maximalist” and “minimalist,” see W. G. Dever, “‘Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up?’ Archaeology and Israelite Historiography,” *BASOR* 297 (Feb. 1995) 61-80; F. H. Cryer, “On the Recently Discovered ‘House of David’ Inscription,” *SJOT* 8 (1994) 3-19; I. W. Provan, “Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel,” *JBL* 114 (1995) 585-606. Note also that many scholars (e.g., H. Gunkel, “Ruth,” *Reden und Aufsätze* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913] 5) have assigned the Book of Ruth to the category of legend.

¹⁹ *KTU* 1.16.iii.6; *KAI* 222.A.11. See R. Lack, “Les origines de Elyon, le Très-Haut, dans la tradition culturelle d’Israël,” *CBQ* 24 (1962) 44-64.

²⁰ N. M. Sarna (*Understanding Genesis* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966] 121-22) sees מָגַן as a catchword linking Gen 14:20 with Gen 15:1, that is, as a link between two subdivisions of the Abraham cycle.

²¹ According to Judith Sanderson (*An Exodus Scroll from Qumran: 4QPaleoExod^m and the Samaritan Tradition* [HSS 30; Atlanta: Scholars, 1986] 333), there are no significant variants here between the MT and 4QPaleoExod^m.

This blessing has been reworked to fit smoothly into a prose narrative, but it still retains a number of poetic elements. The verb נצל, for example, appears twice in practically identical parallel clauses. A phrase מיד or יד מתחה occurs no fewer than three times, certainly for poetic emphasis, yet doubtless also to offer Moses some theological reassurance. Note also the nice rhyme at the blessing's end between אלהים and עליהם. The first main difference between this blessing and that of Melchizedek is Jethro's mention of Egypt's attempts to "defame" (זיד) Israel, a "word" (דבר) which angers Yhwh considerably. The second is that Yhwh himself is named as the empowering deity upon whom the foreigner calls.

In short, this ברוך formula also emphasizes the victory of Israel over an adversary, and it is likewise pronounced by a priest from a neighboring southern tribe. The words of this blessing express unabashed reveling in the power of Yhwh to conquer all other gods. This blessing, like Melchizedek's, seems to have been celebrated at a cultic ceremony.²²

C. The Blessing of Balaam

A third blessing is Balaam's in Num 24:5-9:

How pleasant are your tents, O Jacob!	מה טבו אהליך יעקב
your pavilions, O Israel!	משכנתיך ישראל
Like wadis, they branch out,	כנחלים נטיו
like orchards beside a river,	כגנת עלי נהר
like aloes Yhwh has planted,	כאלהים נטע יהוה
like cedars beside the water.	כארזים עלי מים
He pours out water from his buckets,	זל מים מדליו
his seed over many waters.	וזרעו במים רבים
He exalts his king higher than Agag; ²³	ירם מאגג מלכו
his kingdom is lifted up.	ותגשא מלכתו
El leads him out of Egypt,	אל מוציאו ממצרים
his glory like that of a wild ox.	כתרופת ראם לו
He devours the nations hostile to him.	יאכל גוים צריו
He gnaws their bones.	ועצמתיהם יגרם
Like a lion, he lies down, goes to sleep,	כרע שכב כארי
and just as with any lion, who will disturb him?	וכלביא מי יקימו
Blessed be those who bless you;	מברכיך ברוך
cursed be those who curse you.	וארדיך ארור

²² On the historiographical questions, see C. Brekelmans, "Exodus XVIII and the Origins of Yahwism in Israel," *OTS* 10 (1954) 215-24; F. C. Fensham, "Did a Treaty between the Israelites and the Kenites Exist?" *BASOR* 175 (1964) 51-54; A. Cody, "Exodus 18.12: Jethro Accepts a Covenant with the Israelites," *Bib* 49 (1968) 153-55.

²³ Though H. Rouillard (*La péricope de Balaam [Nombres 22-24]: La prose et les "oracles"* [EBib ns 4; Paris: Gabalda, 1985] 371) is inclined to see the historical Agag here, nevertheless, "Agag devient ici presque aussi symbolique, mythique, que Gog, et c'est l'intuition qu'en ont eue les versions préférant Gog."

This magnificent poem is perhaps the most energetic one on the blessing-of-foreigners trajectory. Its poetic intricacies, its vivid imagery, its transformative metaphors, its unabashed celebration of Israelite power all combine to emphasize the themes already enunciated in the blessings of Melchizedek and Jethro. Yet there are differences. Most obviously, the metaphors of "conquest" are more elaborate, and the language in which they appear is considerably more violent. Further, Balaam does not see one tent; he sees a whole pavilion of tents. He sees not just a stream but a whole network of streams branching out into the desert. The point seems to be that as Israel prepares to cross into Canaan, Abraham's little tribe has grown into something which can no longer be trapped within the loins of old men or frustrated by the wombs of barren women. This "seed" is now a force so potent that it has to be stored in buckets. Each of these images emphasizes and reemphasizes how faithfully God keeps his promises to his people.

In short, Balaam's blessing is yet another ברוך formula pronounced over Israel by yet another foreign priest. Like the blessings of Melchizedek and Jethro, it occurs in a southern locale, functions within an explicitly cultic context, and emphasizes the triumph of Israel over its adversaries.²⁴

D. The Sabean Queen's Blessing

Yet another blessing is that of the Sabean queen, in 1 Kgs 10:8-9:²⁵

Happy are your men!	אשרי אנשיך
Happy are these servants of yours	אשרי עבדיך אלה
who stand before you continually,	העמדים לפניך תמיד
who listen to your wisdom.	השמעים את חכמתך
Blessed be Yhwh your God!	יהי יהוה אלהיך ברוך

The historicity of this international encounter, like that of its counterparts already examined, is hotly disputed. Maximalists like de Vaux, Gray, and Provan basically accept it.²⁶ Minimalists like Würthwein and Davies basically reject it.²⁷ I am of the opinion that in its core this narrative, like

²⁴ Ibid., 345-88.

²⁵ I am indebted to Professor Claus Westermann for reading this material in an earlier draft and for suggesting (in personal correspondence) that I consider this blessing as part of the blessing-of-foreigners trajectory.

²⁶ R. de Vaux, *Les Livres des Rois* (SBJ; Paris: Cerf, 1958) 71; J. Gray, *1 and 2 Kings* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 240-42; I. W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (New International Biblical Commentary, OT series 7; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995) 6-10, 86-87.

²⁷ E. Würthwein, *Das Erste Buch der Könige, Kapitel 1-16* (ATD 11/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977) 120; P. R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"* (JSOTSup 148; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992) 29. N. Abbot ("Pre-Islamic Arab Queens," *AJSL* 58 [1946] 1-11)

those incorporating traditions about Jethro and Balaam,²⁸ contains a poetic blessing slightly reworked, first by tradents interested in magnifying the glory of Solomon, then by tradents interested in emphasizing Solomon's חכמה.²⁹

At any rate, this "parade example of international adulation"³⁰ is again set in the South, in Jerusalem. Though it is not explicitly stated, the temple may well have been the site of this encounter, since the Sabeen queen "saw" the burnt offerings which Solomon offered at the "house of Yhwh" (1 Kgs 10:5). Also, since Solomon, in his dedicatory prayer, explicitly pleads for Yhwh not only to listen to the prayer of the foreigner (נכרי) but also to glorify his own name throughout the earth (1 Kgs 8:41-43), I am inclined to believe that the inclusion of this blessing is organic and fundamental, not secondary, and that it serves, like the blessings in Ruth, to connect the reign of another important messiah (Solomon) to the larger story of Israel's destiny to "bless the nations."

III. The Blessings in the Book of Ruth

We come now to the blessings in Ruth. The first is in Ruth 3:10, where Boaz the Hebrew blesses Ruth the Moabite:

My daughter, may you be blessed by Yhwh!
Your second kindness is better
than the first
in that you have not gone after
the young men,
whether poor or rich!

ברוכה את ליהוה בתי
היטבת חסדך האחרון
מן הראשון
לבלתי לכת אחרי
הבחורים
אם דל ואם עשיר

The second is in 4:14-15, where the women of Bethlehem bless Naomi:

points out that Assyrian inscriptions from the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E. repeatedly mention the existence of Arab queens in the northern Arabian peninsula.

²⁸ See M. S. Moore, *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development* (SBLDS 113; Atlanta: Scholars, 1990) 110-22.

²⁹ To me, this solution seems preferable to the Judaic myth that Solomon deliberately enticed this queen into an erotic alliance from which issued one of Israel's most hated enemies, Nebuchadnezzar (for a discussion, see L. Silberman, "The Queen of Sheba in Judaic Tradition," *Solomon and Sheba* [ed. J. B. Pritchard; London: Phaidon, 1974] 65-84).

³⁰ G. N. Knoppers, *Two Nations under God: The Deuteronomistic History of Solomon and the Dual Monarchies 1: The Reign of Solomon and the Rise of Jeroboam* (HSM 52; Atlanta: Scholars, 1993) 131.

Blessed be Yhwh,
 who has not left you without a redeemer
 today.

May his name become famous in Israel!

May he be a lifesaver for you,
 to sustain your gray head.

For your daughter-in-law, who loves you,
 has given birth to him,
 she who is better for you
 than seven sons!

ברוך יהוה
 אשר לא השבית לך גאל
 היום
 ויקרא שמו בישראל
 והיה לך למשיב נפש
 ולכלכל את שיבתך
 כי כלתך אשר אהבתך
 ילדתו
 אשר היא טובה לך
 משבעה בנים

Vestigial poetic elements seem still to be visible beneath the polished surface of these blessing texts, though we need not speculate, with Jacob Myers, about an original epic poem beneath the prose.³¹ Regardless, these blessings and those mentioned previously share several linguistic elements. Note, for example, the comparative כִּן so characteristic of the blessings of Jethro and Balaam. In Jethro's blessing, the comparison is between Yhwh and "all the gods." In Balaam's blessing, it is between warring kingdoms, Israel and Moab. In the women of Bethlehem's blessing of Naomi, it is between a Moabite girl and "seven sons" of whom Naomi can only dream.

Here in the Book of Ruth the scene is again set in the South, but there is no foreign priest, and no explicitly cultic setting. In their place we have a simpler yet no less profound international encounter, a meeting in a field between a Hebrew man and a Moabite woman. In rabbinic tradition this man is identified with Ibzan, a judge who ruled briefly in the premonarchic period (Judg 12:8-10).³² Yet even if this "official" role could be verified independently, such an identification would not transform Boaz or Ibzan into a magico-religious specialist like Jethro or Balaam.³³

Further, the trajectory's content has changed as well as its form. The blessings in Ruth have little to do with martial conquest but everything to do with marital "conquest." In fact, the nature of the encounter between these foreigners is so subtle and so exquisitely understated—at least in comparison to other accounts of encounters of this kind—that the narrator seems to

³¹ J. M. Myers (*The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth* [Leiden: Brill, 1955]), challenged by J. M. Sasson (*Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* [Biblical Seminar 10; 2d ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989] 222), but supported by B. Porten ("The Scroll of Ruth: A Rhetorical Study," *Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies* 7 [1978] 23-49). J. C. de Moor ("The Poetry of the Book of Ruth," *Or* 53 [1984] 262-83; 55 [1986] 16-41) is not sure whether the book is prose with poetic insertions or "narrative poetry."

³² *Tg. Ruth* 1:6, הוא בורו חסידא, echoed in *b. Bat.* 91a.

³³ For an anthropological definition of the term "magico-religious specialist," see Moore, *Balaam Traditions*, 16-19.

want us to ask, Who is “conquering” whom here, Ruth, or Boaz? In other words, in the Book of Ruth the tradition of the blessing-of-foreigners is beginning to be transformed.³⁴ Some of its elements are preserved intact (the meeting of Israelite and non-Israelite, the presence of ברוך, the southern locale), yet its form is freely adjusted so that the tradition can be adapted to new situations, new challenges, new realities. The scope becomes more familial than national. The tone becomes more humble than triumphal. Most important, the context dictates that the emphasis be placed on the agonies of survival, not on the glories of conquest. Such possibilities lie deep beneath the surface of the blessings of Jethro, Melchizedek, and Balaam. They define the very landscape of Ruth.

In fact, when the women of Bethlehem bless Naomi, we get the feeling that Naomi is also a “foreigner” now. She has a different name, Mara. She has a different status, that of a widow who is now childless. She seems barely recognizable to her old friends (“Is this Naomi?”). Yet, since Naomi’s Moabite daughter-in-law has proven her worth to the community, the women bless Naomi as though she had the potential to be more fruitful than Tamar (another famous foreigner from their past). They bless her because the son produced by this Moabite is to become a restorer (משיב נפש) and redeemer (גאל) who will sustain Naomi. It is this hope, this need, this fulfillment of the promise which becomes so wonderfully explicit in the genealogical תולדות which conclude the book.

IV. The Rabbinic Encounter with the Trajectory

As the canon was closing, many rabbis began to wonder whether the “replenishing” going on in Elimelek’s family might in some way be a paradigm for the “replenishing” of the nation as a whole. They reflected deeply on this mystery, asking themselves why God chose to save the messianic line of Israel through a Moabite woman. Many even derived her name, רות, from the verb רוה, “to replenish.”

In point of fact, the tradition of blessing foreigners continued to occupy Israel’s attention. The rabbis argued often as they tried to decide exactly what to do with Ruth the foreigner, much as they argued over what to do with the foreigners Balaam, Jethro, and Melchizedek.³⁵ Some saw Ruth as a good person but little more, and the Book of Ruth as something beautiful yet rather curiously out of place in the biblical corpus. Others, accepting Ruth as a fully

³⁴ See *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith* (ed. B. Halpern and J. D. Levenson; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981).

³⁵ See Judith R. Baskin, *Pharaoh’s Counselors: Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition* (BJS 47; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983).

canonical book, wrestled hard with the questions raised by it, wondering how it might connect to their larger tradition, imagining how its universalist ethic might actually work in a world so often and so brutally anti-Semitic.³⁶

A. *The Targum*

The targum to Ruth begins with a preamble in which the Aramaic translator gives the reason for the famine which drove Elimelek and Naomi out of Judah: "Ten severe famines are decreed from heaven . . . from the day eternity was created until the coming of the Messianic kingdom, to reprove . . . (the Gentiles) for polluting the earth."³⁷ The translator then lists these ten famines in order. The first nine occurred in the days of Adam, Lamech, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Boaz, David, Elijah, and Elisha. The tenth and last famine, a future one yet to occur, is described as the worst of them all. In it there will be a tremendous hunger and thirst not only for literal food, but also for the "prophetic decree of God," for it will be a "famine of knowledge."³⁸

In other words, in one of the earliest Jewish commentaries on Ruth the book is read not as part of the blessing traditions, much less as a part of the blessing-of-foreigners trajectory, but rather as a xenophobic diatribe against Israel's enemies, real or imagined. In that writer's perspective, God predetermined the famine mentioned in the Book of Ruth to test his people and punish the Gentiles. Elimelek's tragedy, therefore, was interpreted as part of a *famine* trajectory, not as part of a blessing trajectory.

According to the MT of Ruth 1:4, for example, Mahlon and Chilion simply "took for themselves Moabite wives," but the author of the targum comments that by so doing "they transgressed the decree of Yhwh."³⁹ In the MT, the second of the two Moabite wives is called simply by her name, "Ruth." The author of the targum, however, in a crude attempt to defame this woman and the "liberal" attitude toward foreigners which she represented, states that she was a "daughter of Eglon, king of Moab" (the famous fat chieftain killed by Ehud in Judg 3:22).⁴⁰

³⁶ See D. R. G. Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth* (JSOTSup 2; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1977). For further study of the narratives in Genesis from a structuralist perspective, with sensitivity to the problems associated with anti-Semitism, see S. D. Kunin, *The Logic of Incest: A Structuralist Analysis of Hebrew Mythology* (JSOTSup 185; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

³⁷ *Tg. Ruth* 1:1. The targumic texts cited here are from A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic 4A: The Hagiographa* (Leiden: Brill, 1968) 120-21.

³⁸ At least one Jewish writer (1 Macc 4:46) refers to such a time in the Hasmonean period.

³⁹ *Tg. Ruth* 1:4, ועברו על גירת מימרא דיהודא.

⁴⁰ *Tg. Ruth* 1:4, בת עגלון מלכא דמואב, echoed in *b. Nazir* 23b. Similar tactics of defamation are used against Balaam in *b. Sanh.* 105.

While in the MT of Ruth 1:5 Mahlon and Chilion “died,” in *Targum Ruth* they died “because they transgressed against the decree of Yhwh and connected themselves to foreign peoples.”⁴¹ All this takes place in Moab, a land which the author of the targum calls “polluted,”⁴² in spite of the fact that it was, after all, Moabite food grown in Moabite soil which saved David’s great-grandmother and preserved the messianic line from destruction.

Again, in the MT of 1:6 Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem after hearing that the Judean famine is over; in a rare direct reference to deity, the narrator says she heard that “Yhwh had visited his people to give them bread.”⁴³ The author of the targum, however, offers a different interpretation, with Naomi going back to Judah not so much because of what Yhwh had done but “because of (Naomi’s) plea to Ibzan the prince (Boaz) and her prayers which she prayed before Yhwh.”⁴⁴ In other words, she was able to return more because of her own merit than because of God’s grace.

The author of the targum also insinuates that when Naomi’s Moabite daughters-in-law tried to return with her to Judah, her reason for rejecting their offer was rather mercenary: “May Yhwh give you wages of peace for the goodness you have given me—and it is a wage.”⁴⁵ Moreover, this journey could not even be planned until Ruth and Orpah admitted to Naomi that they were willing to “convert” (אתגיירא) to Yahwism—a step nowhere suggested, neither in the MT nor in the versions, but staunchly preached in the targum. The author of *Targum Ruth* embellishes this by having them refuse to say, “Let us return to our people and our religion,” even though Naomi, in the MT, clearly tells Ruth to follow Orpah back to “her gods” (אלהיה), 1:15.⁴⁶ This religious ambiguity deepens in *Tg. Ruth* 1:17 when Ruth says, “Your God is my God,” but only after Naomi has said, “I am commanded not to practice foreign worship.”⁴⁷ The author of *Targum Ruth* finally tries to resolve the “issue of conversion” by having Ruth say to Naomi, “If you return (to Judah) I will convert.”⁴⁸

We could look at many more examples, but these should suffice to make the point. In short, the author of *Targum Ruth* consistently and deliberately converts one of the Hebrew Bible’s most beautiful narratives about diversity

⁴¹ *Tg. Ruth* 1:5, ועל דעברו על גזירת מימרא דיהוה ואתחתנו בעממין נוכראין.

⁴² *Tg. Ruth* 1:5, ארעא מסאבחה.

⁴³ MT, לחת להם לחם. Jack M. Sasson (“Ruth,” *The Literary Guide to the Bible* [ed. R. Alter and F. Kermodé; Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1987] 322) points out the poetic alliteration.

⁴⁴ *Tg. Ruth* 1:6, בבין זכותיה דאבצן נגידא ובצלוחיה דצלי קדם יהוה.

⁴⁵ *Tg. Ruth* 1:9, יהב יהוה לכח אגר שלים על טיבותא די עבדתון לי ובהואו אגר.

⁴⁶ But cf. דחלחה, *Tg. Ruth* 1:15.

⁴⁷ *Tg. Ruth* 1:16, ואתפקינא ולא למפלח פולחנא נוכראה אמרת רות אלהך הוא אלהי.

⁴⁸ *Tg. Ruth* 1:16, ארום תאיבא אנא לאתגיירא.

and tolerance into a manifesto for ethnoreligious extremism, in direct contrast to the blessing-of-foreigners trajectory in which the narrative is canonically embedded.⁴⁹

B. The Talmud

In the Babylonian Talmud the tradition is transformed again. One of the best places to see this is in a famous rabbinic debate over the interpretation of Deuteronomy 23. In Deut 23:3-6, Moabites and Ammonites are prohibited from entering into the assembly of Yhwh, and the prohibition is to last for ten generations. In the Mishnah, "ten generations" are interpreted as "forever" (לעולם).⁵⁰

The Talmud, however, is not so rigid. In *b. Yeb.* 76-77 the rabbis approach this delicate problem by restaging a fictional debate between Saul, Abner, and Doeg the Edomite. In this debate, "Doeg" plays the role of prosecuting attorney, while "Abner" plays that of defense attorney. "Doeg" opens the debate by questioning whether the law excluding Moabites and Ammonites has been faithfully followed. Angrily he attacks the legitimacy of every Jew who, he feels, has relaxed the law in any significant way. Then he goes after David himself: "Instead of inquiring whether (David) is fit to be king or not, inquire rather whether he is permitted to enter the assembly . . . , because he is descended from Ruth the Moabitess."⁵¹ To this "Abner" responds with a well-known halakah, "We learned: 'An Ammonite, but not an Ammonitess; A Moabite, but not a Moabitess.'"⁵²

This halakah does little to pacify "Doeg," who demands that "Abner" explain it to his satisfaction. Finally, it is explained, in five parts.⁵³ (1) Since the biblical text gives a specific reason for the prohibition of Moabites and Ammonites ("because they did not meet you on the way with food and water"), and (2) since respectable women would not walk on public highways in ancient times,⁵⁴ one must conclude (3) that no Ammonite or Moabite

⁴⁹ D. R. G. Beattie ("The Targum of Ruth—A Sectarial Composition?" *JJS* 26 [1985] 222-29) backs away from calling *Targum Ruth* a "sectarian" commentary but does admit that it is often at odds with rabbinic principles. Norman Golb (*Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls? The Search for the Secret of Qumran* [New York: Scribner, 1995] 64) calls for a much more stringent definition of "sectarian" than is common in contemporary scholarship.

⁵⁰ *m. Yeb.* 8.3.

⁵¹ *b. Yeb.* 76b.

⁵² *Ibid.* This halakah is repeated often (e.g., in *b. Yeb.* 69a; *b. Ket.* 7b; *b. Qidd.* 75a). The hermeneutical rationale for it is discussed in *b. Yeb.* 6a.

⁵³ *b. Yeb.* 77a.

⁵⁴ This is deduced from Ps 45:14, "all glorious is the princess within," with the adverb "within" (פנימה) taken, in classic rabbinic fashion, to mean that a respectable woman always tries to stay indoors, that is, in the sphere of her "glory" (כבוד). Further support for this view of

woman can fairly be held responsible for this crime, and this means (4) that Ammonite and Moabite women cannot be prohibited from attending Yhwh's assembly.⁵⁵ Therefore, (5) Ruth is a legitimate ancestor of David, and accusations like that of "Doeg" should be summarily dismissed. Thus, the rabbis have capitalized on the accusation in order to teach their students how to guide the tradition back to a view of foreigners influenced more by biblical theology than by nationalist extremism. The method which they use to accomplish this seems to be based on little more than a legal technicality, but the immediate effect is the same. The hyperethnic position is rejected because it is too impractical, too extreme.⁵⁶

V. Concluding Reflections

Far from disparaging the talmudic tradition, the remarks made in this study are meant to buttress it by suggesting that the blessing-of-foreigners trajectory offers a much firmer basis for evaluating the role played by Ruth. That the tradition evident along this trajectory needs to be recovered should be very clear because of the ideas antithetical to it found not only in *Targum Ruth* but in other ancient texts as well.⁵⁷ Ethnocentrism and extremist nationalism are problems deeply embedded in the collective psyches of many proud peoples, not just of ancient Israel.⁵⁸ Something more than legal acrobatics and semantic rescue operations is necessary if we are to give Ruth, the person as well as the book, what is due to them.

In my opinion, one of the major reasons why this little novella, the Book of Ruth, has always had such a profound impact on readers is that because of the way it is structured, both literarily and *traditio-historically*, it emanates a message which continues to challenge the dark desires of any proud people. Indirectly but clearly, the Book of Ruth speaks of a God who delights in

women is drawn from Gen 18:9, where Sarah stays "in the tent" while her husband goes outside to entertain heavenly guests.

⁵⁵ Thus the halakah, "An Ammonite, but not an Ammonitess; a Moabite, but not a Moabites."

⁵⁶ Albert Baumgarten ("A Note on the Book of Ruth," *JANESCU* 5 [1973] 11-15) tends to gloss over the nationalistic elements of the rabbinic tradition and overemphasize the humanistic elements.

⁵⁷ I have in mind the interpretation of Deut 23:3-5 laid down in 4QMMT B.44, 48 (*Qumran Cave 4* [vol.] 5: *Miqsat Ma'ase Ha-Torah* [DJD 10; ed. Elisha Qimron and John Strugnell; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994] 51): "one must not let them [Moabites and Israelites] be united" in "forbidden unions."

⁵⁸ On the power of ethnicity to shape values generally, see Hunter Lewis, *A Question of Values: Six Ways We Make the Personal Choices That Shape Our Lives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 86-97.

creating, recreating, and redeeming the created order. Consequently, it continues to fill the oppressed and the broken and the marginalized and the disenfranchised with hope and courage.

Yes, the Book of Ruth is a powerful statement about one woman's persistent desire to rediscover her faith,⁵⁹ a beautiful example of what Hermann Gunkel calls "the heroism of faith."⁶⁰ Yes, it is a powerful statement about the power of human love generally—the love of two women bound together by a common sorrow,⁶¹ the love of an older man for a younger woman, the love of the members of a small community for a returning widow in desperate need of their support. But read against the blessing-of-foreigners trajectory, it is also a powerful theological statement about a God who keeps his promises, a creator who takes great delight in blessing his multifaceted creation, a Redeemer who will use any means—any people, tradition, or *person*—to accomplish his gracious will.⁶²

⁵⁹ M. S. Moore, "Naomi's Journey," *Reconciliation: A Study of Biblical Families in Conflict* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994) 151-63.

⁶⁰ Gunkel, "Ruth," 76 ("Heroismus der Treue").

⁶¹ A. Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Biblical Seminar 2; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985).

⁶² I am thus in basic agreement with Wilhelm Rudolph (*Das Buch Ruth, das Hohe Lied, die Klagelieder* [KAT 17/1-3; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1962] 32) about the primary thrust of the book: "to speak not of human beings but of God," to let us "learn how God acts."



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