

# NAOMI'S MISSION: A COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK OF RUTH

BRIAN WEINSTEIN

Naomi is the central actor in the Book of Ruth. The book explains her mission, which is to lead Ruth to the land of Judah and to have her marry Boaz. The union of Ruth and Boaz begins a process that culminates in the birth of David. As monarch, David will change Israel from its decentralized, weak and sometimes chaotic rule under the judges to centralized, powerful and orderly rule under the monarchy.

The first and last words of the Book of Ruth give us some hints about this impending change: In chapter one we read: *And it happened in the days when the judges judged . . .* (1:1). The Book ends with: *Boaz begot Oved; and Oved begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David* (4:21-22). Samuel, the judge, makes explicit the transition from one political system to another (I Sam.17:12-13): the Lord tells Samuel to anoint Jesse's son as king of Judah, *and the spirit of the Lord gripped David from that day on*. For seven years he ruled his own tribe. After battles with the Philistines and a terrible civil war, all the other tribes recognized David as their only leader. He ruled over them for 33 years, securing the land, unifying, and legitimizing the state in the eyes of its neighbors and its own inhabitants. In short, the Book of Ruth is a political text explaining the origins of the Israelite royal dynasty.

But, why was Naomi's mission necessary? Ruth, the woman Naomi recruits to be David's great-grandmother, is a foreigner, a Moabite. I want to prove that rather than being a disability, David's Moabite ancestry is essential to his success and the political ascendancy of the tribe of Judah among the Israelites.

It is ordained that Naomi and her family should go to live in foreign territory. Because of a famine in Judah, Naomi and her husband and two sons leave their home in Bethlehem for neighboring Moab. In the Bible, famine – the Hebrew word is *ra'av* [רעב] – signifies far more than the absence of food; it can also signify a lack of morality and a widespread disobedience to God's will which leads to famine as a punishment. In the biblical famines, those who

*Brian Weinstein has a Ph.D in political science and has taught at Howard University in Washington, DC. He is a member of Adas Israel in Washington and Moreshet Israel in Jerusalem.*

depart from the land find sustenance in a foreign land – meaning they find something which is missing in Israel. When they return, they themselves have changed and they bring a change with them. Abram went to Egypt, and he returned a rich man who was henceforth able to guarantee material security for himself and his family in the Promised Land (Gen. 12-13). Jacob and his sons went to Egypt, and their descendants returned as a nation large enough to begin the conquest of the Land of Israel. Naomi went to Moab and returned with Ruth, the future mother of a dynasty (Bava Batra 91b), the House of David, which transformed the political system.

Why, of all the peoples, did Ruth have to be a Moabite?<sup>1</sup> We read in Deuteronomy that God previously condemned the Moabites in very strong language for trying to thwart Israelite progress toward the Promised Land:

*Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam . . . to curse you, [the Moabites] shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord forever (Deut. 23:4-5).*

Significantly, God does not tell Israel to destroy the Moabites the way He told them to destroy the Amalekites, but He says that a Moabite cannot become an Israelite. (The Talmud explains that the interdiction does not apply to females [Yevamoth 76b]). Now, back to Naomi. I am postponing the answer to the question of why Ruth had to be a Moabite. For the present, I want to continue with the narrative.

How does Naomi fulfill her mission to recruit Ruth? She is living in Moab with her husband and her two sons. Names in the Bible are useful indicators of a person's role and importance. Naomi's name means "pleasant" or "gentle." She is someone who would attract others to her. The names of her husband and sons are strange and have negative connotations. Elimelech, means, according to Midrash,<sup>2</sup> "to me shall kingship come." Accordingly, he is boastful and arrogant and dies soon after the arrival in Moab.

The names of her two sons Machlon and Kilion, are somewhat strange, even comical, and "Midrash says that their names indicate 'they were blotted out and perished from the world.'"<sup>3</sup> Before they die, however, they perform a useful function by marrying Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. The text does not bother to say which of the two sons married Ruth, but we know they had no

children even after 10 years of marriage. What is important is that the marriage brought Ruth under the influence of Naomi.

The rabbis have found positive associations in the name Ruth. Midrash tells us<sup>4</sup> that the numerical value of the name Ruth is 606 which, by adding the seven Noahide commandments, equals 613, the total commandments of God to the Israelites.

Naomi's sons die, and Naomi begins her journey of return to Israel by testing her daughters-in-law. Both Ruth and Orpah say they will accompany her. When Naomi tells them to return to their own families, they refuse. Naomi tells them a second time to stay in their own country because they will have no hope of husbands outside Moab. Orpah decides to remain in Moab. Naomi tells Ruth for the third time to stay in her own land. Ruth adamantly refuses; she will be loyal to Naomi and will take Israel to be her people, Israel's God to be her God. Ruth has passed the test. Naomi accepts her and leads her to Bethlehem.

From this test and this dialogue between the two women emerges some traditions concerning conversion to Judaism. Shaye Cohen tells us<sup>5</sup> that after the conquest of the Promised Land, Jewish, Judahite or Judean identity meant that one lived in Judah-Judea or that one traced one's origins to this geographical entity. One did not have to be a descendant of Judah.<sup>6</sup> In other words, Ruth could become a Judean by moving, marrying, and living there. At the time of the Judges, according to Cohen, one did not even have to believe in the One God to be a Judean.

In Bethlehem, Naomi tells everyone what happened in Moab and introduces Ruth as a loyal person who wishes to join with the Israelite people. Boaz, a close relative of Naomi's husband, hears about Ruth. His name means "in whom there is strength." Although Boaz is obviously attracted to Ruth, it is Naomi who takes charge by instructing Ruth to stay close to Boaz and to lie down near him one night. Boaz then wants to marry her, because he obviously loves her and because some close relative from the family of Ruth's deceased husband is supposed to marry her in order to carry on the family line. Another, closer relative to Ruth's first husband, known only as "Ploni Almoni" [that is, "So-and-So"] has the prior right to make this marriage.

This man declines to take Ruth, and Boaz marries her. Then we read: *God let her conceive, and she bore a son* (4:13). This statement proves that Ruth

had to wait to be married to Boaz in order to give birth. God kept her barren for the 10 years of her marriage to Naomi's son, just as He kept Sarah, Rachel and Hannah barren for years after their marriages. His reason in the case of Ruth is that He wanted her to give birth in Judah to ensure Jewish identity for her offspring.

Her friends give the child the name Obed, which means "serve" as in "serve the Lord" or "work for the Lord." Naomi has succeeded in recruiting Ruth the Moabite into the land of Judah, and into the bed of Boaz where she provides the Judahites with the beginnings of the dynasty of the House of David. Mission accomplished.

In case you wonder if Ruth has been ignored and forgotten after giving birth, the Talmud assures us that Ruth lived a long life, long enough to see her own great-great-grandson Solomon crowned as King of Israel (Baba Bathra 91b). Obviously, the Israelites honored her.

Now, I want to deal with the question I asked earlier: Why does Judah need an infusion of Moabite blood? The Zohar tells us that despite the evil actions of the Moabites there was goodness and even nobility deep within them. They were not blotted out "because the precious pearls [meaning Ruth and Orpah] had not yet issued from them" (Zohar Vol. III, p. 190a). The Zohar continues: "We do not ask why Obed was not born from another woman, for assuredly Ruth was necessary for that purpose to the exclusion of any other woman."

What did Ruth bring to Judah from Moab? She brought a tradition and experience of monarchy. Moabites had kings, such as Balak, but Israelites had no such experience. After the initial conflict between Israel and Moab, they lived for many years in peace and there was interaction between them. David had contact with them, and even sought refuge for his parents there after his flight from King Saul. Eventually, Moab became King David's vassal.

We can ask a similar question about Jethro: What did this man, Moses' Midianite father-in-law, contribute to Israel? Because of his organizational experience as a priest, he advised Moses to set up a judicial and administrative system. We can ask the same question about Hiram, King of Tyre, a cousin of the detested Canaanites. He provided King Solomon with the artisans necessary to construct the Temple in Jerusalem. Jethro, Hiram and Ruth came from communities and states with more political, military and administrative experience and artistic talent than the wandering Israelites possessed. They sym-

bolize the infusion of needed outside talent, particularly into the tribe of Judah, which became the most powerful of the tribes.

David was then fully capable of fulfilling the prediction of our ancestor Jacob, and came to rule all of Israel:

*You, O Judah, your brothers shall praise;  
Your hand shall be on the nape of your foes;  
Your father's sons shall bow low to you.*

[ . . . ]

*The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet;  
So that tribute shall come to him  
And the homage of peoples be his (Gen. 49:8-10).*

We read in the Bible that the Jews are a people living apart: They do not eat certain foods; they reject the deities of their neighbors; they worship the One God in particular ways. Paradoxically, Jews also depend on others for knowledge and strength. According to Yosef Green, the Book of Ruth helps us understand

. . . the innate balance between particularism and universalism. Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people, but the God of Israel is not only a national God and Israel's own national interests do not constitute the boundaries of its ethical concerns.<sup>7</sup>

The most important lesson from studying Naomi's mission is that Jews are able to maintain a particular identity while learning from the other peoples.

#### NOTES

1. The Talmud tells us that not only was Ruth a member of one of the most detested nations; she descended from Balak the powerful king and determined enemy of Israel (Nazir 23b).
2. ArtScroll Tanach Series, The Book of Ruth, p. 63, note 2
3. Artscroll, p. 63, note 2.
4. Artscroll, p. 67.
5. Shaye Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
6. Cohen, p. 87
7. Yosef Green, "Universalism and/or Particularism," *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* Vol. XXX:1, No..117 (Jan-Mar 2002) pp. 3-9.