

RUTH AND ELISHA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

RUTH WALFISH

In this brief article I will compare two biblical characters, Ruth and Elisha. On the face of it they seem to have little in common, yet it is my contention that the Bible purposely connects these two thematically.¹ A study of these characters also necessitates an analysis of the two people most significant in their lives: Naomi on the one hand and Elijah on the other. I will argue that the two characters under discussion have several common characteristics, most strikingly the rejection of their former lives and the adoption of a new mentor or parent-like figure. The comparison between Elisha and Ruth also underscores significant differences between the two, highlighting the very different characters and fates of the two protagonists. Finally, I believe that this study will enable us to uncover certain lessons that the Bible wishes to teach us about loyalty, failure, and continuity.

In Ruth 1:8-15, Naomi, widow of Elimelech from Bethlehem, importunes her two Moabite daughters-in-law to return to Moab, and not to accompany her on the journey back to Judea. Naomi insists that the two women, widows of her sons, have no future in Judea, hinting that no men will agree to marry them, presumably because of their Moabite ethnicity. Orpah reluctantly agrees to return home, but Ruth refuses and clings to Naomi, despite the very real possibility that she will be unable to find a husband and establish a family in her new home. In her famous declaration, she avers that Naomi's God, land, and burial place will be hers as well (Ruth 1:16-17). When Naomi sees that Ruth refuses to leave her, she drops her objections, and implicitly accepts Ruth's offer. As time goes on, Naomi becomes more and more connected to Ruth (3:1 and 18). By the end of the book, the women of Bethlehem sing Ruth's praises to Naomi, proclaiming that Ruth loves Naomi and is more precious to her than seven sons (4:15).

Why does Naomi try to dissuade her daughters-in-law from joining her on her return to Judea? As stated above, she may have been concerned for their welfare. But she may also have felt that returning to Judea with two Moabite daughters-in-law was an embarrassment that she wished to avoid. Not only *Ruth Walfish has a Ph.D. in Jewish Education from Hebrew University and heads the Department of Bible at Efrata Teacher's College in Jerusalem. She is an associate editor of the Jewish Bible Quarterly.*

would she be returning widowed, bereaved, and destitute, but Ruth and Orpah would testify to an additional failure: her sons had "married out." Living in a foreign land for ten years and marrying local women clearly indicated that the two men had had little intention of returning to Judea. Had they had offspring in Moab, it is even less likely that they would have considered a return to their homeland. Moreover, leaving Judea at a time of famine was surely perceived by the inhabitants as a kind of desertion,² and the longer the family of Elimelech and Naomi stayed away, the greater would be the disdain and estrangement felt towards them.³ Nevertheless, in a surprising twist, Ruth, the non-Jewish wife of Mahlon, is revealed as a true daughter of Zion, an *eshet hayil* (woman of valor),⁴ who ultimately becomes the progenitor of David, king of Israel (4:17 and 22).

Just as Naomi tried to dissuade Ruth from accompanying her on her journey back to Judea, so too did Elijah, Elisha's mentor, discourage Elisha from joining him. In the Elisha stories we can discern two separate occasions when Elijah tries to give Elisha the brush-off: in the appointment scene (I Kgs. 19:19-21) and in the farewell scene (II Kgs. 2:1-18). The appointment scene can only be understood in light of the event that preceded it, Elijah's flight from Jezebel and his experience in the desert (I Kgs. 19:1-18). The threat to his life brings Elijah to the depths of despair; he at first wishes to die (v. 4), and subsequently twice accuses the children of Israel of worshipping idols and forsaking God (vv. 10 and 14). God's reaction in the latter case is to instruct Elijah to anoint three new leaders, one of whom is Elisha the son of Shaphat, Elijah's designated successor. This is an unusual event in biblical history: Moses is the only other prophet who was told to appoint his successor. But whereas Moses voluntarily seeks a replacement for himself out of concern for the future of the nation (Num. 27:16), Elijah does not. In fact, the divine instruction to Elijah to appoint his successor can be perceived as an implied criticism of Elijah's prophetic behavior: either Elijah has failed by not preventing the infidelity that he cites, or he has failed in his task as a prophet by maligning the people rather than defending them before God (see Radak). There is, perhaps, an additional reason for this disapproval: Elijah abandoned his people on several occasions, both after he announced the drought and after Jezebel's threats. In this sense he reminds us of Elimelech, who (as we saw) left the land of Judea at the onset of famine. Abandoning his

people when they need him most is inappropriate behavior for a prophet, or for any leader, to say the least; and one can argue that by choosing to run away to the southernmost point of the Land of Israel (in addition to his suicidal wish), Elijah has demonstrated that he has lost hope in the people. And so it is time to replace him.

In the story of Elisha's appointment as successor to Elijah, we can detect a certain reluctance on Elijah's part to obey God's command. He approaches Elisha as the latter is working the field, and wordlessly throws his cloak over him, an apparent sign of election. Elisha, understanding the symbolism of the act, wishes to bid farewell to his parents, but Elijah seems to object to this, even hinting that communication with his parents shows that Elisha does not want the appointment or is not worthy of it. Interestingly enough, Naomi had urged her daughters-in-law to return to their homes, and by implication to their parents,⁵ as her way of disengaging from them; the Hebrew verbs *lekhnah* and *shovnah*, "go" and "return", appear several times in the passage.⁶ Perhaps this is Elijah's intention as well, when he says to Elisha: *Lekh shuv* (I Kgs. 19:20), *go return [to your parents]*. Commentators differ as to whether Elisha actually returned to his parents to bid them farewell,⁷ but in any event it is clear that, like Ruth, Elisha abandons his former life, and transfers his loyalty to a new object.

As to the farewell scene, here too we find that Elijah is reluctant to have Elisha accompany him on his final journey. Elijah tries to persuade Elisha to abandon him at one of the stations along the way (II Kgs. 2:1-6), be it Gilgal, Bethel, or Jericho. Elisha, for his part, takes an oath that he will not abandon his mentor (vv. 2, 4, 6), reminding us of the famous oath that Ruth took regarding her loyalty to Naomi (Ruth 1:17). After Elisha witnesses the miraculous splitting of the Jordan River, Elijah asks him what he would request, and Elisha replies, '*Let a double portion of your spirit pass on to me*' (II Kgs. 2:9). Instead of granting Elisha's request, as expected, Elijah "tests" his disciple: if Elisha sees Elijah being taken away, then indeed his wish will be granted. In the case of both Ruth-Naomi and Elisha-Elijah, therefore, the "elder statesman" is going on a critical journey which she/he would prefer to undertake alone, and only grudgingly accedes to the wish of the novice.

Why does Elijah seem to have reservations about appointing Elisha, and about the latter accompanying him on his final odyssey? I speculated in the

case of Naomi that she returned to Judea with a sense of failure and did not wish to have that failure concretized in the form of Moabite daughters-in-law. By the same token, Elijah must have felt that the command to anoint Elisha was a clear indication that he, Elijah, had failed in his prophetic mission, as argued above. Elisha represents a new era, a departure from Elijah's style of leadership. We have seen, then, that both Ruth and Elisha leave their biological parents in order to set out on a new path. Through their tenaciousness, they demonstrate that they are faithful adherents to their adoptive "parents": Elisha calls Elijah '*my father, my father*' (II Kgs. 2:12), and Ruth is called "my daughter" by Naomi on five different occasions.⁸

Ruth and Elisha are similar in another way: they both provide others with sustenance. Ruth makes sure to glean wheat for her mother-in-law so that she will survive (Ruth 2:2); and immediately upon his election as Elijah's heir, Elisha slaughters his cattle and distributes the meat to the people (I Kgs. 19:21). After assuming his prophetic role, Elisha "cures" the poisonous waters of Jericho so that the inhabitants can live in the city and not perish (II Kgs. 2:19-22). On several different occasions, in later stories (chapter 4), Elisha miraculously provides food for the needy

Based on the parallels noted so far, we can conclude that there are times when members of the "older generation", for whatever reason, find it hard to make room for their successors. Elijah may have been disappointed in himself as a prophet, and a successor could be a painful reminder of this fact. The sojourn in Moab was a disaster for Naomi, and she may not have wished to be reminded of that period in her life. But when the "candidates" of the future, whether appointed or self-appointed, refuse to accept rejection, persist in clinging to their mentors, and live up to their expectations, they are able to prove that they are indeed worthy of fulfilling the tasks that lie ahead. Failure need not be viewed as a final judgment; there is still the possibility of change and correction in the next generation.

Up to this point we have noted similarities between Ruth and Elisha, and what these similarities can teach us. I believe that the differences between them are equally instructive.

Naomi and Ruth travel together from Moab to Judea. They are leaving a land of exile and entering the Land of Israel, where Ruth will embrace the Jewish tradition and homeland. It is interesting to observe that while still an

inhabitant of Moab, Ruth did not formally embrace Judaism: Jewish practice at that time was, it seems, inextricably bound up with living in the Land. Elijah and Elisha, on the other hand, are leaving the Land of Israel in their final act together, crossing the Jordan to the other side. As scholars have pointed out,⁹ the sites that the two pass through are related to Joshua's conquest of the land. Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho are all places that Joshua conquered or where he encamped. Passing through them and crossing the Jordan in the reverse direction taken by Joshua seems to indicate that the conquest of the land is no longer an assured fact. Admittedly, Elisha will cross back after the "death" of Elijah, but he has been inexorably touched by exile, and only a few chapters later the Northern Kingdom will experience exile (II Kgs. 17). Indeed, the direction taken by that journey is just one indication of the vast differences between the two stories. One could argue that the stories are really polar opposites; one is a story of hope, the other a story of impending doom.

Even before the exile of the ten tribes, the land is plagued by drought and famine. Contrast this with the news that Naomi receives, that Judea is experiencing a renewal and there is enough food for everyone, thanks to God's intervention (Ruth 1:6). Elisha resorts to miracles in order to answer the pressing call for food; nowhere does God intervene directly to end the famine and revive the land.¹⁰ Ruth, however, benefits from a system of charity whereby landowners set aside some of their produce for the poor. Society as a whole is not dependent on miracles in order to function; entrenched laws and customs provide the hungry with their basic needs. Indeed, Elisha the "miracle worker" is called upon time and again to save the downtrodden, the leprous, the army besieged, and the famished when all else fails. In the story of Ruth there are no supernatural elements; the people bring about their own salvation and redemption through acts of *hesed*, loving kindness.

Another interesting difference between the two stories is the ultimate fate of the two main characters. After leaving his parents and joining Elijah, Elisha remains a somewhat enigmatic (and at times anti-social) figure. Like his mentor, Elijah, he apparently never marries. Ruth, on the other hand, despite all the obstacles in her way, marries and has a child. Not only does she renew herself, but she also rejuvenates her mother-in-law, who experiences a second motherhood with the birth of Obed, Ruth's son (Ruth 4:17). As stated above,

Ruth is the progenitor of David, the great king of Israel. He stands in contrast to the rulers of Elisha's time, who mostly suffer from a lack of faith. At times, Elisha confronts these kings and chastises them for their failings. It is a sad commentary on Israelite kingship, which has degenerated from the once exalted position that it enjoyed at the time of David to such a debased level at the time of Elijah and Elisha.

What can we conclude from the contrast between the two characters and the events that surround them? It would seem that the Bible celebrates normal, natural existence, marriage and family. Even when catastrophe strikes, as it did with Elimelech's family, people can help each other and work toward creating a just community. What also emerges is the centrality of the Land of Israel: true redemption can take place only there, and exile is the dire punishment for flouting the rules of the Torah. While Elisha is clearly Elijah's successor, and a miracle-worker ordained by God, he cannot effect a real change in society. It is the "Ruths" of this world, in their day-to-day, normative behavior, who seem capable of affecting others, setting off a chain of action that can deeply influence history.

NOTES

1. After submitting this article, I discovered that Yosefa Rachaman had recently published an article with a similar theme: "Ruth and Elisha: Common Features and Differences," in: *B.D.D.*, April 26, 2012, pp. 81-90 (Hebrew). Rachaman cites many parallels between the two characters, some of which I have also noted. However, she has chosen not to focus on the story of Elisha's election, which plays a major role in my study. In addition, Rachaman's conclusions center primarily on the relationship between Elisha and Elijah, whereas I have broadened my outlook to include larger national issues that come into play in each story.
2. Compare *Ruth Rabbah* 1:4. In this *derashah*, Elimelech is portrayed as a wealthy man who could have provided his hungry compatriots with food, but chose instead to desert them and flee to Moab, where he would not be "bothered" by the poor and needy.
3. Some commentators have understood the words with which the women of Bethlehem greet Naomi upon her return, "*Can this be Naomi?*" (Ruth 1:19), as expressing their grim satisfaction that this deserter is now in such dire straits.
4. Ruth 3:11.
5. Naomi does not explicitly mention the return to the parents, but Boaz refers to it in his encounter with Ruth (2:11): *You have left your father and your mother.*
6. Ruth 1, vv. 8, 11, 12.
7. See the discussion of this question in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary to I Kings 19:20.
8. Interestingly, Naomi does not call Ruth "*my daughter*" after Ruth declares her loyalty to Naomi, but only after Ruth and she are settled in Bethlehem, and Ruth offers to glean wheat for them both.

9. See: Elhanan Samet, *Pirkei Eliyyahu* (Jerusalem, 2003) p. 500 (Hebrew).

10. The story of the four lepers (II Kgs. 7) tells of a temporary relief from starvation, brought about by divine intervention (v. 6), but there is no long-lasting salvation.



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