

Who is In and Who is Out



The Two Voices of Ruth

A small ancient book captures both the spirit of feminism and the durability of patriarchal tradition



A brief, pastoral literary work is tucked among the books of the biblical canon. It has no bloody battles, no immoral commands, no zealotry or hatred. It is a much-loved little book, about which Rabbi Zeira said in the Midrash: “This *megillah* tells us nothing of purity or impurity, of prohibition or permission. For what purpose, then, was it written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness.” Its name: *Megillat Ruth*, the Book (or “Scroll”) of Ruth.

{ By **ORIT AVNERY**

Rabbi Zeira's overall impression has been confirmed and embellished by many generations of scholars and teachers. It is echoed annually by pulpit rabbis on the holiday Shavuot, when this *megillah* is read in the synagogue. Yet the pleasant, cozy nature of the Book of Ruth masks its contradictions and complexities, which derive from ancient Moab and Bethlehem and continue to resonate in Jewish life.

Can the fringes of Jewish society become a part of the center?

The Book of Ruth tells the story of a marginal character, and deals with an important question: Can the fringes of Jewish society become a part of the center? Ruth, a childless, non-Jewish widow, arrives in Bethlehem from her native Moab. Her travels are over, but a new, more difficult journey begins: one that crosses boundaries of gender, nationality and religion. On all these topics, the Book of Ruth does not deliver a single, clear-cut opinion. It may be argued, in fact, that the text of this *megillah* offers the reader two different paths of interpretation, each buttressed by a selective analysis of the material. Let us consider these in turn.

The Harmony of Women

The first option is to see the Book of Ruth from a feminist, somewhat subversive perspective, in which the gentile woman wins in the end and is accepted by Jewish society. Indeed the world of women and female solidarity are at the center of the story. When Naomi's husband and two sons die, what at first seemed like a story about men quickly and decisively shifts into a story about women. The first verse of the book introduces "a man of Bethlehem ... he and his wife and his two sons." But two verses later, the man, Elimelech, is identified as "Naomi's

husband," and he dies. Her two sons marry Moabite women, and then also die; and "the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband." Before, she was "his wife;" now he is "her husband."

The very first voices to be heard are those of women: the Jewish woman Naomi and her Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Throughout the *megillah*, women are at the center of conversation, as speakers and as subjects; indeed women are present in every scene of the story. When Naomi tries to persuade her sons' widows to return to their Moabite families, she uses an unusual expression: "Turn back, each of you to her mother's house," as opposed to the more commonplace "father's house." The wording underscores the idea that at a time of grief, a woman needs a supportive female environment. Only there can the widows regain their strength and rebuild their lives.

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All through the Book of Ruth, women are portrayed as active and decisive, taking the initiative, able to set goals and achieve them. Naomi sends Ruth to the threshing-floor (*goren* in Hebrew), albeit with the caution of a conservative older woman: "And he will tell you what you are to do." Whereas Ruth, a spirited young woman with a will of her own, turns to Boaz and tells him explicitly what to do: "Spread your robe over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman." Boaz, aroused by the assertive woman who stands before him, readily complies and goes one better: "I will do for you whatever you ask." The narrative even contains a hint of mockery: The manly Boaz is a leader in his community, and commands respect as a



Naomi, Ruth and Orpah,
by William Blake, 1795.

farmer and man of wealth. Now, he falls into the web of a young woman, ready to do everything according to her wishes.

Boaz was a kinsman of Ruth's dead husband, and Naomi sends Ruth to the *goren* in the hope that the resultant intimacy will end up in marriage, and in the preservation of her son's stake in the lands of Bethlehem, as well as her own family connection with Ruth. According to the Torah, the brother of a man who dies childless is required to take the man's widow for a wife, to continue his family line. (This practice, known as levirate marriage, is called *yibbum* in Hebrew.) Boaz is not a brother, but Naomi and Ruth adapt the law to their own purposes.

This creative interpretation of Torah law is compounded by a greater subversion: apparent disregard for the rules governing membership in the Jewish people – who is in and who is out. The Torah, after all, forbids marriage with Moabites:

An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord forever; 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 the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. (Deuteronomy 23:4-5)

This rationale for the prohibition surely does not apply in the case of Ruth, who proved by her actions that she had not maintained the hostile tradition of her people vis-à-vis the Israelites. Thus, according to the Book of Ruth, what happens in practice overrides the formal stricture of Deuteronomy.

What is more, the marriage of Boaz and Ruth creates not only a personal family dynasty but a national one, the house of David, their great-grandson. Ruth the Moabite moves from the margin to the center, and enters the national pantheon. This is perhaps the true greatness of this *megillah*: the recognition that mingling with the Other, even members of a hostile group, may be the foundation of growth and continuity. The Book of Ruth is willing to base the Davidic monarchy on an act of deviance that flouts the rules – indeed a law intended to protect the continuity of the community.

The *megillah* describes a process of transition – from the outside to the inside, from foreignness to acceptance – and Ruth clearly represents the essence of the foreigner. In general, the Bible stresses the physical beauty of its heroines, but in Ruth's case, her looks are never described. It does not matter if she was pretty or not. She is a faceless heroine, liberated of gender, freed from the patriarchal male gaze.

Ruth has come a long way. When she arrived in Bethlehem together with her mother-in-law, it was Naomi who was the center of local attention. But by the end of the *megillah*, the city elders allow her to enter the town gate, ritualizing her entry into the community. Until now, she has been on the outside: on the road with Naomi, gleaning in the field of Boaz, leaving the city for the *goren*. Only in the fourth chapter, in the scene of the “redemption” of the inheritance, at the town gate, is she permitted to enter the house of Boaz. The gate is a symbolic locus of social definition: the elders sit as gatekeepers, determining who is in and who is out. At the climactic moment of the story, the elders and

the rest of the people bless the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, the foreigner who is now at the center of family and history.

In the biblical stories of Lot and his daughters and of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar, sexual transgression, initiated by strong women, is a source of tribal and even human continuity. Here, Ruth breaks protocol and takes risks, as if in the knowledge that only such a move will assure the continuance of Jewish history. Sometimes, these stories teach us, it is necessary to step outside the law in order to maintain the tradition.

More than anything, the Book of Ruth describes a friendship between two women unlike any other in the Bible. Ruth's motives – compassion, loyalty, and love – never appear elsewhere in a relationship between women. Again and again, women are portrayed as competitive and jealous. Cases of female rivalry are the biblical norm: Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, Hannah and Peninah, and even the two prostitutes who appear with the baby in front of King Solomon. The Book of Ruth provides an alternative model. True, Ruth and Naomi are not sharing a man, but they could, after all, represent conflicting interests. The older woman wants to preserve the memory of her husband and son; the younger wants a family of her own. Yet there is harmony between them, and they take care of one another.

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The biblical text uses the verb *davkah* in Ruth 1:14: “Ruth held fast to her,” i.e. Naomi. More commonly, that same Hebrew verb applies to man and woman, as in Genesis

2:24: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave [*v’davak*] to his wife; and they shall be one flesh.” Just as a man moves from his biological family to his wife, so too does Ruth leave her parents and cling to her mother-in-law Naomi. It is a female bond, based on love and responsibility, caring and belonging.

Generally, the relationships of biblical woman are mediated by men. The Book of Ruth asks: how do daughter-in-law and mother-in-law relate to each other after the son has died? Are they like mother and daughter? Or is it more like a marriage? It is an independent tie that exists beyond men, beyond women’s roles in a patriarchal society. When Ruth’s son is born, Naomi takes him to her bosom, and the neighborhood women give him his name, Obed. The closing scene of the *megillah* is all about women. The new baby is not related to Mahlon, Ruth’s late husband. The child ties the women together, Ruth and Naomi, and brings them both a gift of new life.

A Son has been Born to Naomi

This comforting, liberal and feminist reading, however, is not the only interpretation available. The text of Ruth also undermines these conclusions, and presents women and foreigners as utterly marginal to the normative patriarchal system. The book begins as a man’s story – “and a man of Bethlehem of Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab” – and ends with the lineage of men: “Now these are the generations of Peretz ...” The very last verse suggests that the entire justification of this *megillah* derives from the birth of David, as if the women in the story are supporting players in a male drama. The women may have been instrumental in solving a family problem, but their activity is but a subplot, behind the scenes of the main narrative.

Indeed, the women too seem to see themselves as part of a patriarchal system. Naomi’s agenda focuses on woman’s role as

child-bearer. Ruth, in the end, turns her back on her own heritage in order to carry forth her husband’s name. She serves as an example of a woman who is loyal, first and foremost, to her husband – a willing participant in the male-centered story that gives power and honor to men, and lists only fathers and male children in the account of the family saga.

Yes, Ruth is industrious and proactive, as we have seen. Yet the erotic scene at the threshing-floor conforms to a patriarchal picture of woman as seductress. Moreover, it is not this encounter that carries weight; it is the scene at the city gate, where ten men (and only men) decide who may enter the community, that really matters. Only now may Boaz and Ruth be legally married in the eyes of the male-dominated collective.

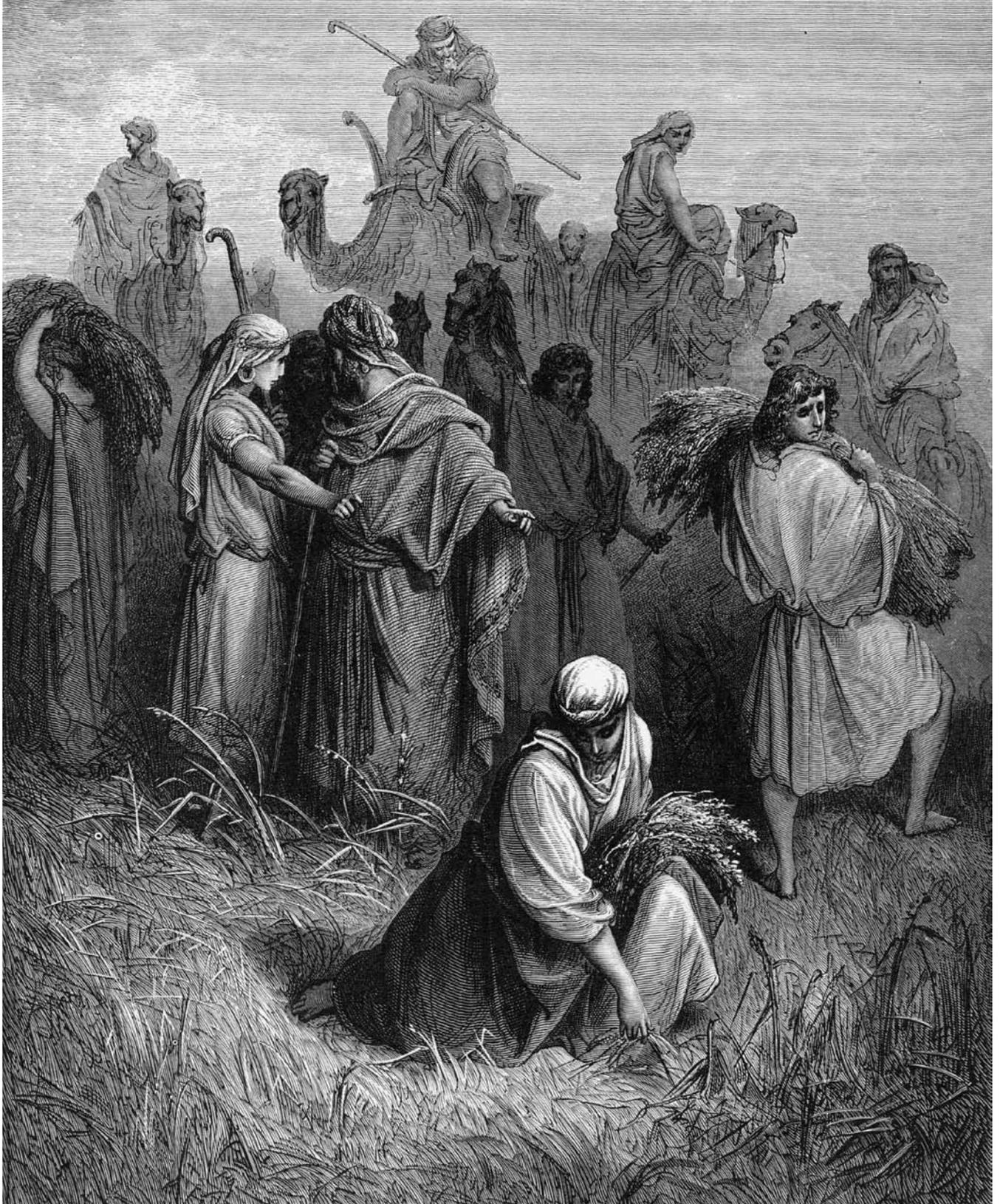
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In the process, women are turned from actors into objects. Ruth, who initiated the whole process, becomes the object of contractual acquisition, handed over to Boaz in the same fashion that he acquires the lands of Elimelech, Naomi’s late husband. Boaz’s words “to the elders and all the people” clearly summarize the transaction, and support a patriarchal reading of the whole story:

You are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelech’s and all that was Kilion’s and Mahlon’s from the hand of Naomi. And also Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, have I bought to be my wife, to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance, so that the name of the dead shall not be cut off from among his brothers, and from the gate of his place. (Ruth 4:9-10)



“The Gleaners,” Bible illustration by Gustave Doré (1832-1883).



The fourth and last chapter of this slender book brings us back into the light of day, the real world of social relations based on gender, nationality and status. It is thus not surprising that Ruth retires to the sidelines and Boaz takes center stage. It is he, not she, who receives the blessing of the elders. Nor is her name explicitly mentioned: “The Lord make the woman that has come into your house like Rachel and like Leah, who both built the house of Israel.” The absence of her name, in a story about the perpetuation of names, is doubly significant. Her role is to carry the seed of Boaz – and her identity, in the end, is unimportant.

Consider, too, the birth of Ruth’s male child. Naomi takes the baby to her breast, and it is she who is blessed by the other women: “Blessed be the Lord, which has not left you this day without a redeemer, that his name may be famous in Israel ... A son has been born to Naomi.” By displacing the birth onto Naomi, the women emphasize its significance for the tribe of Judah, and even suggest that Ruth cannot be fully trusted to give the boy a proper Jewish upbringing.

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One comes away with the impression that at the end of the *megillah* that bears her name, Ruth is divested of her needs and her individuality. Throughout, all the local characters, from the “servants who was set over the reapers” in the fields of Boaz to the elders at the gate, regard Ruth coldly, as a Moabite. Boaz, who accepts and embraces her, is the exception who proves the rule. Overall, the community of Bethlehem considers Ruth to be a surrogate mother, a womb for hire. Until her child is born, she is of no interest to the local women, and even after the birth, she is shunted aside in favor of Naomi, one of their own. And Naomi, too, is but a secondary player in the narrative of patriarchal lineage.

Conservative Subversion

Where does this leave us? The *megillah* presents a subversive female story, yet it is wrapped in a standard patriarchal package. Ruth the outsider enters Bethlehem and marries Boaz, but by the end her voice is silenced. At the start, she speaks, acts and initiates, only to become the object of a business transaction, with her child attributed to Naomi. The Torah law of levirate marriage is adapted with flexibility, yet rigid patriarchal structures continue intact. And the Moabite origin of the House of David, bold and transgressive though it may be, is enclosed within a conventional narrative of a dynasty of Jewish males.

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This doubleness, in my view, is the right way to read Ruth. Neither the feminist nor the patriarchal interpretation will do on its own, for the text itself is polyphonic, speaking in more than a single voice. David Biale, in *Eros and the Jews*, has it right when he says that the Book of Ruth “at once reinforces *and* subverts patriarchy,” though not many other scholars have taken this point of view. Readers who acknowledge the mixed messages of the text, and are willing to absorb them all, are best able to construct a full picture of the complex reality they reflect.

The Book of Ruth, it is generally held, was written in the 4th or 5th century BCE, in the period of the return from

Zion following the Babylonian captivity. The *megillah* reflects a fierce and painful polemic that was central to Jewish life in that era, on a subject that remains difficult in our own time: intermarriage.

The Jewish communities in the Land of Israel in those days were then composed of three groups: Jews who had remained behind and were not exiled to Babylon; Jews who returned from exile; and non-Jews who accompanied the returning exiles – many of them gentile women married to Israelites. Tensions were high, as evidenced by the order of Ezra the priestly scribe that Jewish men must “put away” and “separate from” their “alien” or “foreign” women (Ezra 10), and also the disturbing scene described in Nehemiah 13:

Also in those days I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab; and half their children spoke in the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but according to the language of each people. And I quarreled with them, and cursed them, and struck some of them, and pulled off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons, or for yourselves.”

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Considered in this context, it would seem that the Book of Ruth constitutes a frank composite of conflicting voices

within the Jewish people. It is as if two schools of thought sat down together to write the same story, from different points of view: one in support of accepting foreign women, and the other opposed. Thus the Book of Ruth is the embodiment of the polemic itself, not an argument for one position or the other.

Beyond that, the book is a literary work that touches in many subtle ways upon such enduring issues as one’s relation to the other – to those who are different, marginal, foreign, alien. Its chosen heroine is as foreign as they come – a Moabite – and its center, Bethlehem, is the home territory of the Israelite monarchy. The peaceful *Megillat Ruth* is a potentially explosive text, precisely because it does not judge which of its voices is more compelling, or require the reader to do so. It does not say that all foreign women should be accepted: Ruth is portrayed as an exceptional person with unique qualities. On the other hand, the text does not call for barring the door to all those who are different from “us.” All in all, it tells the story of a Moabite woman who not only joined the people of Israel, but became a central figure in its royal dynasty.

When both sides see themselves as partners in the same polyphonic story, it may be simultaneously told as a tale of radical subversion and one of classic conservatism, with each side balancing the other. The main point is that both sides of the controversy have a stake in the national story, and each recognizes the other as integral to the big picture. Only then can they begin to find a sensitive, cautious solution that both preserves the traditional system and enables it, at the same time, to meet the challenges of changing times. A solution that gives fresh meaning to the prescription of Rabbi Zeira: “To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness.”



Orit Avnery, a fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, is completing her doctorate in Bible studies at Bar-Ilan University. Orit lectures at a variety of venues, including Pelech High School and Midreshet Lindenbaum.