

# GLEANINGS

## Reflections on Ruth

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*Ruth in Boaz's Field*, by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld  
(1794–1872), located at The National Gallery, London

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# David's Ancestry and the Meaning of Ruth

Rabbi Shalom Carmy

**C**an the book of Ruth be identified with one theme? Should it? R. Zeira says: "This scroll contains neither impurity nor purity, neither stringency nor leniency, and why was it written? It is to teach you the reward of those who act with loving-kindness" (Ruth Rabba 2:15). Immediately before this statement R. Ḥanina b. Ada mentions that Naomi's daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, had devoted themselves to the burial of their spouses and had given up their right to the *ketuba*.

Offhand, there seems to be no compelling reason to reduce a biblical book to one idea. It is almost as if R. Zeira is attempting to forestall attempts to harness Ruth to some other overarching idea. No doubt other candidates are available. The introduction to *Daat Mikra* on Ruth lists no fewer than five ideas taught by the Scroll: These include the value of the Land of Israel, the value of faithful conversion, submission to fate and diligent work, the desire to depict an episode from the period of the Judges, and to record a story illustrating the vitality of certain halakhot. The editor insists that all these themes are intended by the text "without a doubt." With all due respect, although all these ideas can be

found and can, if required, be made the topic of a sermon, they do not appear self-evidently prominent for the ordinary reader.

One theme, however, is impossible not to notice. The book ends with the genealogy of Boaz extending to David. It would not have been surprising had one of the midrashic rabbis proposed that the purpose of Ruth was to supply the lineage of David. Some later writers have gone further and concentrated on the paradoxical elements in David's family history, namely his being descended from Ruth the Moabite convert, whereby the greatest sanctity emerges, in a mystical fashion, from the blending of the aristocratic house of Judah and the seed of Moab. From the sixteenth-century commentator Rabbi Moshe Alshekh this occult notion migrated into the ArtScroll Ruth intended for lay readers.<sup>1</sup> R. Zeira's stress on the everyday morality of the book sounds almost like a counterpoint to the mystical, royal-centered alternative.

The genealogy of David might be remarkable for two significantly different reasons. On the one hand, David is descended from Judah via Perez. The birth of Perez, and his preeminence over his twin brother Zerach, is already announced in Genesis 38. Jacob's blessing to his children (Gen. 49:10 – "the staff shall not veer away from Judah") assigns unique distinction to the tribe of Judah. Ibn Ezra, for example, takes this to mean that Judah is intended to be the leader of the tribes from the beginning, which is why the banner of Judah is in the vanguard in the desert (Num. 1) and elsewhere. Rashi holds that beginning with the emergence of David the tribe of Judah fulfills this destiny as the foremost among the tribes.

On the other hand, David's being the progeny of Ruth attaches potential stigma to his name. From certain hostile perspectives his ancestry is inferior, perhaps even unworthy. Deuteronomy 24:5 rules that Moabites may not enter the "congregation of God"; that is, they may not intermarry with Jews of standard genealogy. The Halakha, to be sure, limits the prohibition to male Moabite descendants: women

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1. The paradoxical nature of David, and hence the messianic line, coming from the incestuous acts of Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19) also appears in Maharal, *Netzah Yisrael*, chapter 32. For elaboration on this theme, see the opening chapter by Halpern in this volume.

may enter the congregation and the marriage of Boaz and Ruth exemplifies the law. All the same, the biblical text, read without the Oral Law interpretation, invites prejudice against all Moabite converts, male and female. Whatever else the story of Ruth signifies, to recount approvingly the story of Boaz and Ruth would then serve as a counterweight to such potential disparagement. As we noted, some Jewish thinkers even came to regard David's irregular background as a mystical virtue rather than a deficiency, though this tendency is not pertinent to our discussion. The rabbinic discourse about "Moabite males but not Moabite females" clearly implies that the lenient ruling, which legitimized David's status, was not self-evident at the time. In theory that interpretation could have been reversed later on, in which case legitimacy would be retroactively withdrawn from the descendants of Boaz and Ruth.

Nevertheless, I submit that both the genealogical prestige of David as the king to be and the possible objection to him on genealogical grounds are underplayed rather than overplayed in the biblical corpus overall and in Ruth particularly.

As to kingship, the leadership of Judah among the sons of Jacob is promoted in the last chapters of Genesis where he negotiates with his father about the brothers' second journey to Egypt and where he confronts the still-disguised Joseph in the hour of peril. As noted, Jacob's blessing singles him out as leader and potential sovereign. We have seen the alternative explanations of Rashi and Ibn Ezra about the content of the blessing: does it mean that Judah will stand at the head of Israel from the beginning of Jewish history (even before the rise of David) or that he will succeed to kingship at a particular stage of the story (at the time of David)?

Despite these factors, Jacob's blessing/prophecy is not explicitly cited in the early biblical narrative. At the beginning of Judges, for example, Judah is selected to lead the offensive against those Canaanites who remained after the campaigns of Joshua. Ibn Ezra indeed regards this as evidence for his interpretation of Jacob's blessing. But this reading is not stated in Judges – one may adopt Rashi's view that Jacob's words apply to the later period and maintain that Judah's preeminence in Judges 1 is a one-time divine election not grounded in Jacob's blessing. The rest of the Book of Judges, in which Judah does not play a particularly distinguished

role, unfolds with no reference or allusion to Jacob's deathbed blessing. Only in the last episode – the concubine of Gibeah – is Judah again selected to lead the other tribes, this time in civil war against Benjamin. The result is disastrous. In Judges the blessing of Jacob is not at all set up as a deterministic “roadmap” played out in the later narrative.

When the time comes for Samuel to appoint a king, the biblical text says nothing about a presumed right or precedence of Judah to the crown. Saul of Benjamin is chosen. When Saul's kingship is rejected and he must be replaced, the prophet goes to Bethlehem where he eventually anoints David, thus bringing Jacob's blessing to fruition, according to Rashi. Yet nothing in the text implies that Samuel's choice of David's family and of David is programmed, so to speak, as such a fulfillment. The inevitability of these happenings is known to us, but only in retrospect. The prospective reading is open-ended; it depends on the choices of the protagonists rather than on the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy.

Throughout his career David faces rivals and enemies. In rabbinic literature, David's detractors refer to his dubious lineage to impeach his public standing. “Whose son is the young man?” asks Doeg the Edomite, when David smites Goliath, and the Talmud takes the remark as a snide comment about his parentage, implying that he is not only unworthy to join royalty, but perhaps unworthy to marry within the Jewish congregation. Doeg insinuates that the lenient decision may not be the final word on David.<sup>2</sup> In the biblical text, however, it seems that Doeg is merely asking a question, albeit perhaps an unfriendly one, about the young champion's family. In the Bible, neither Doeg nor any of David's other adversaries explicitly denigrates him because of his controversial genealogy.

Let me draw an analogy to the way that the consequences of David's sin with Bathsheba are portrayed in II Samuel and in the Talmud. The prophet Nathan tells David that he will be punished severely for the sin, primarily through his children – the death of Bathsheba's firstborn infant, Absalom's rebellion and so forth. At the same time, the rebellion, which almost costs David his throne, is presented in terms of natural psychological-political causation rather than as the execution of

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2. Yevamot 76b.

divine punishment for David's sin. The divine role is evident to the reader even if it is not made explicit in the long narrative. The Talmud, however, makes David quite self-conscious about the opprobrium attached to him due to his guilt: he imagines himself harassed by sly questions about the penalty for adulterers.<sup>3</sup> His penance and his sense of unworthiness loom large in Psalm 51 and in rabbinic interpretations of other verses though they are absent from the political conflict portrayed in Samuel.<sup>4</sup> What may be prominent in the drama of David's private religious life and his connection to God is not in the foreground of his political biography.

In a word, there is no contradiction between the explicit biblical account and the rabbinic elaboration. If David was disparaged on the grounds of his ancestry, as the Talmud tells us, the slurs are nevertheless discernible only between the lines of the biblical text, so to speak, rather than stated openly. Likewise, the insinuations about David's private behavior do not overtly spill over into the politically centered story line. Anyone familiar with contemporary political abuse can easily think of parallels. This distinction between what is openly alleged and what is merely hinted at is a significant one, both in politics and in human intercourse.

The upshot of our discussion to this point may appear confusing. On the one hand, in the light of the prohibition against Moabite intermarriage in Deuteronomy and the attention it gets in rabbinic literature, the problem of David's ancestry is too important to ignore. The genealogy that ends the Book of Ruth attests to the importance of the royal lineage. At the same time, I argued that neither Samuel nor Ruth confront this problem openly. How then does the Book of Ruth help us think about David and his origins?

My response is that Ruth comments on David's line, going back to Ruth, precisely by presenting her marriage within the framework of an idyllic, decidedly non-polemic story. The reader cannot avoid the negative connotations of Elimelech's abandonment of the Land of Israel for

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3. Sanhedrin 107a.

4. See my discussion in "Personal Ethics, Public Virtue and Political Legitimacy in Biblical Kings and American Presidents," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (March 2010): 40:1.

Moab. The reader is made very much aware of Ruth's sacrifice in cleaving to her mother-in-law and embracing a new national and religious identity, and we are told about the economic hardships that meet her as an isolated newcomer in Bethlehem. Once Boaz becomes committed to Ruth's welfare, we are reminded of the various difficulties that may block her marriage to him. As noted, these impediments could have been spelled out in halakhic language and the social stigma attendant upon them might have been confronted directly and even polemically. Instead, while these hurdles are alluded to, they do not become the main subject of the narrative but instead serve as the vaguely sketched background to the story. The result may not be especially useful to the halakhist who wants to evaluate the precise halakhic issues under debate: although the external similarities between what Boaz proposes and the institution of *yibum* are inescapable, the Bible does nothing to formulate clearly what has to be done and why. All the same the biblical account may be of great significance in appreciating the human sensitivities at stake.

Let me illustrate this idea with one exegetical example: In Ruth 3:18 Naomi assures her daughter-in-law that Boaz will not rest until he settles the matter this very day. The reader has every reason to expect prompt action from Boaz. In chapter 4, however, we are told that Boaz repairs to the city gate; there he encounters the "redeemer," the relative of Ruth's family who apparently had precedence over Boaz in taking over Elimelech's property and marrying Ruth. Malbim, who noticed and was puzzled by Boaz's leisurely conduct, explains that had the redeemer not happened to come by, Boaz would have summoned him to the court. One could equally well suggest that Boaz knew that the redeemer would inevitably turn up, perhaps on his way to or from his fields. Whatever the reason, the exposition in the text does not reinforce our anticipation of Boaz's desire for quick action.

Why did Boaz take his time? It is possible that Boaz preferred to approach him in a public forum, rather than privately, in order to ensure that the redeemer felt obliged to take action immediately; otherwise he could have deferred his decision for another day. It is also possible that Boaz did not want to pressure the redeemer. The evidence for this is that Boaz initiates a conversation with him, first about redeeming the property and only afterwards about marrying Ruth. In this way Boaz gives

the redeemer opportunities to back out of the deal without embarrassing Ruth. The redeemer might have declined to take over the property, in which case the question of marriage would never have come up. If Boaz indeed wanted to marry Ruth, the perception of alacrity in moving the matter along might have created the appearance, in the eyes of the community, that Boaz was overly eager to marry her himself. The redeemer's final withdrawal remains ambiguous: he fears "destroying [his] inheritance." These words avoid spelling out the exact nature of his worries: he may be referring to social or halakhic problems – Ruth's inferior status as a Moabite convert or concern that the halakhic dispensation "male Moabite and not female Moabite" might turn out to be impermanent;<sup>5</sup> or there might have been unspecified difficulties of an economic nature, perhaps tied to the redeemer's children or wives.

And so, we arrive at a conclusion. On the one hand, the last verses, taking us from Judah through Boaz and Ruth to David, are too significant and climactic to be marginalized. On the other hand, as noted, the text carefully avoids addressing the genealogical issues in a polemical context, or even making their exact nature explicit. This is precisely what we would expect if the purpose was to recognize the unusual nature of David's origins without in any way making them the subject of overt gossip and scandalmongering. Hence the delicacy with which the dialogue is carried on underlines the mood of loving-kindness that R. Zeira found characteristic of this biblical book.

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5. Rashi to Ruth 4:6 alludes to his uncertainty or ignorance about Ruth's halakhic status.