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LIFE AGAINST DEATH IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

The commonly accepted view that *Ruth* is a pastoral idyll is one capable of blinding us to its central message. For underlying this simple and charming little tale is a cosmic struggle of profound and manifold implications — the struggle between life and death. There is, of course, no abstract treatment of this theme. It is expressed, rather, through the personal, national and religious experiences of people's lives, experiences which, to the author of *Ruth*, are quite inseparable.

We would be justified, I believe, in dividing the characters of the book into two major camps, that of life and that of death: Ruth versus Orpah, Boaz versus Elimelech, Machlon and Kilyon, the land of Israel versus the field of Moab, and, most important, Naomi versus Marah. The crucial figure in *Ruth* is Naomi, for she is the center of its conflict. She moves from Israel to Moab to Israel, from life to death and back again, and the outcome of the struggle for life in the last three chapters depends upon which aspect of Naomi emerges—does she remain Marah or does Naomi appear once more?

As for the G-d of Israel, He is no doubt responsible for both life and death; trust in Him, however, yields fertility both to the land and to the individual. We shall see, in fact, that the redemption effected by Boaz is simply a manifestation of the work of the true Redeemer. In *Ruth*, then, G-d appears more frequently among the soldiers of life; it is this that assures their victory.

Let us now turn to the text itself.

The book begins by misleading us. Elimelech and his family flee form a land of famine and death to one in which they may live, from Israel to Moab. However, we quickly begin to notice certain indications that the contrast showing Israel as the land of death and Moab as that of life is one destined to bring tragedy to this

family. For the introduction of the ominous names Machlon and Kilyon[1] is followed by the death of Elimelech in the land where he had hoped to find new life.

Yet the flame of hope is not easily extinguished, and Naomi's sons continue to look to Moab for the generation of life—they choose Moabite women as their wives. Ten apparently childless years follow, and then—death. It is clear that the refugees from Judah were wrong in their estimate of Moab, for Naomi now stands vanquished by the forces of death. Could they have been wrong about Israel as well?

Suddenly, Naomi hears that there are signs of new life in her homeland, for "the L-rd had remembered his people in giveng them bread."[2] She decides to return. But her feeling that there may be life in Israel is a weak one at best; Naomi appears to be in a state of utter despair. Death is everywhere. If it must be faced, she may as well face it in the land of her fathers. But shall she subject young Moabite women to the famished land from which she herself had fled? This Naomi cannot do. She consequently attempts to persuade her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab where they may "find rest each in the house of her husband," while the journey to Israel would mean the acceptance of the life of a widow and of eternal sterility. Orpah is convinced.

With Ruth's answer, however, comes the death-knell of this false contrast of Israel and Moab which has brought despair to Naomi. ". . . Thy people shall be my people, and they G-d my G-d; where thou diest will I die, and there will I be buried; the L-rd do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me." If Israel is death says Ruth, then let me die. But Ruth does not really believe that Israel is death, and her faith will ultimately furnish the saving catharsis required for Naomi's rebirth.

Upon arrival at Bethelehem, Naomi proclaims herself Marah, for the last ten years have seen the famine of her land, the dulling of her national identification, and the destruction of her family. She is wholly oppressed by death. Can the "Naomi" in her be revived? Can the forces of life achieve a new conquest? The answers will depend upon Ruth.

As we read the next three chapters, we are not expected to forget chapter one. A reader who *has* forgotten might indeed read

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[1] Both come from roots denoting sickness and destruction.
[2] Is this reminiscent of God's "remembering" (also "Hashem pakad") of Sarah with the granting of a new fertility?

these chapters as a peaceful idyll; one who remembers will read them as the account of a grand effort to overcome the powerful forces of evil and of death that seem triumphant during Naomi's declaration that she is Marah.

The first regeneration that we witness is that of the land. Chapter one ends with the beginning of the barley harvest, and through chapters two and three there is a recurring emphasis upon the productivity of the land. The very events narrated take place almost exclusively on fertile fields—and this is no accident. For the rebirth of the land is connected with and symbolic of that second, most significant regeneration—that toward which Naomi is striving through Ruth.

It may be meaningful that the barley which heralds the land's renewed productivity at the end of chapter one is given to Ruth by Boaz at the end of chapter three "so that thou mayest not return emptyhanded to thy mother-in-law." Through Ruth, Naomi again becomes fertile. "A child has been born to Naomi," say her neighbors (4.17), not "to Ruth," but "to Naomi."

Naomi herself is most keenly aware of this crucial dependence upon her daughter-in-law. "And she came to her mother-in-law, and she (Naomi) said, 'Who are you, my daughter?' And she told all that the man had done to her" (3.16). Commentators who maintain that it was dark and Naomi did not recognize Ruth are, I feel, missing the point. Naomi has blurted out the key question, one that has been tormenting her since the return from Moab, one whose answer she must know. "Who are you, my daughter? Are you of Moab or of Israel? Are you truly of my family? Can *your* future be mine as well? *Who are you, my daughter?*"

These questions and their ultimate resolution have deep religious and national implications as well. The regeneration of Ruth (and through her, of Naomi) is intimately bound up with her choice of the G-d of Israel. "May your reward be complete," says Boaz to Ruth, "from the L-rd, G-d of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek shelter" (2.12). Because Ruth has sought shelter under the wings of G-d, she merits the right to ask Boaz (3.9), "Spread your wing[3] over your servant." Here, the result will be new life—a life which the linguistic parallel refers not only to Boaz but to G-d Himself. G-d is the redeemer in 1.6. Boaz is

[3] Whether a better translation in this context is "skirt" or "edge of garment" is not directly relevant to the major point which is the fact that the same Hebrew word is used in both cases.

the redeemer in 3.9. The latter is an instrument in the divine plan.

The deep commitment in Ruth's new national identification and the life which it renews offers final refutation to the initial error of Elimelech and Naomi. This too is subtly indicated by parallel expressions. The kindness (*chesed*) which Ruth performed in Moab was "with the dead and with Naomi" (1.8), a Naomi who was at that time in a state of living death. The *chesed* of Boaz (2.20) is with both living and dead. Finally, we reach the *chesed* of which Ruth becomes capable in the land of Israel (3.10), a *chesed* which is not only with the living but which promises new hope for the future; this *chesed* is her marriage with Boaz. The word appears in these three verses and no where else in *Ruth*.

While in Moab, Naomi exhorted her daughters-in-law to remain there and "find rest (*menuchah*) each one in the house of her husband." Israel promised cessation of life and of fertility. What is the true outcome? Naomi succeeds in finding a *"manoach"* (3.1), a place of rest, for Ruth in her marriage to Boaz. Another indication of Elimelech's tragic mistake.

In the last chapter we pass from the new life of the land, a life which had been merely preparatory and symbolic, to the culmination of Naomi's efforts at a religious, national and personal rebirth. These elements are united in the statement (4.14-15), "Blessed be the *L-rd* who hath not left thee this day without a near kinsman, and let his name be famous in *Israel*. And he shall be unto *thee* a restorer of life, and a nourisher of thine old age; for thy daughter-in-law, who loveth three, who is better to three than seven sons, hath borne him."

Through its triumph over the death at the beginning of *Ruth*, life is made ever stronger. And the life which springs from the union of Ruth and Boaz is life eternal for the Jewish people and for humanity as a whole. King David is borne, and with him the personification of the Messianic ideal—an ideal striving to inspire all of mankind with a new and more nearly perfect life.

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